# Earning "Dual Degrees": Black Bookstores as Alternative Knowledge Spaces

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*This article examines the role of two African American-owned and -operated bookstores in the literacy practices and education of their participants. Part of a larger ethnographic study of Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs), this study shows how featured authors and audience participants considered these bookstores as both alternative and supplementary knowledge spaces for literacy learning. This research offers educational anthropology and literacy research new ways of looking at the links between literacy, identity, and education.* [alternative knowledge, participatory literacy communities, bookstores, African American, homeschooling]

What role have black-owned and -operated bookstores played in the literacy practices of their supporters? How have participants in black bookstore events utilized these sites as alternative and supplementary knowledge spaces to formal educational institutions? Although black bookstores have maintained a culture of literate practices in their communities, their contributions to literacy learning have not been critically examined in anthropological or literacy research (Fisher 2003a).[1] The aim of this article is to examine the role of events at two black-owned and -operated bookstores in the lives of their participants—the event organizers, featured writers, and audience—the literacy practices within these events, and how participants grew to value these venues as learning institutions or sites for earning "dual degrees." Specifically, the bookstore events invited participants to use poetry and literature while providing exposure to language and literary images in ways not always accessible in schools. Participants viewed this alternative or supplementary education—one that included the geography, histories, cultures, and experiences of peoples throughout the African Diaspora—as an opportunity to access knowledge that was often devalued or omitted from mainstream schooling.

The concept of "dual degrees" acknowledges the importance of both formal and informal learning spaces. Mr. Young, a featured author and bookstore participant in the present study,[2] understood black bookstores in this northern California setting to provide "another program of study" defined and cultivated by people of African descent:

> Because there was this absence of anything black or relevant to African people in terms of our education, most students ended up doing a dual degree—one that was recognized by the university and one they did on their own in terms of reading, in terms of study groups. There was a clear perception that there was a program of study that the university said, "This is what we want you to do to get your degree." And in that program of study, there

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> was nothing really relevant or important to black people. We talked very carefully about the fact that we had to craft another program of study important to black people—and that we would call our "dual degree."

Although a degree is typically associated with formal institutions of higher education, here it is also employed to reference a body of knowledge that is not only "relevant to" but also crafted by people of African descent. According to Mr. Young, black bookstores aided in the development of this second "program of study" because of the owners' commitment to host and promote black authors and to carry literature, art, and other materials such as music, spoken word poetry, and cards and calendars featuring the work of black artists. Mr. Young's reflection on earning a dual degree also was a commentary on conventional school-based knowledge, which, he indicated, is only one part of what constitutes an "education." A university or college degree would satisfy institutional requirements; however, it would not satisfy requirements to be an informed and engaged member of one's community. I further argue that in these contexts, the method of sharing and exchanging knowledge through culturally distinct literacy practices is considered as important as the knowledge itself. In these contexts, teaching and learning are not formalized; rather, learners are immersed in language experiences. Not only did adult participants include Carol's Books and Marcus Books—the two sites for this study—in their quest for information, they also used these bookstores as sites to expose their children to black literate traditions. An author reading is not a tradition unique to black bookstores; however, one featured author noted that the difference between a reading at a black bookstore and one at a commercial bookseller "is [like] the difference between home cooking and eating at McDonalds."

In addition to examining the role of these sites in the lives of participants, this study unpacks the salient characteristics of the bookstore events that fostered enthusiasm for literacy and literature. These findings inform literacy education while identifying prevailing ideas about words, language, and the value of "informal" learning. Research questions were based on the units of analysis, including participant narratives (i.e., those of event organizers, featured writers and poets, and audience participants) and bookstore activities:

- *Questions dealing with participants*: What are the goals of event organizers? How do event organizers view their role in their communities? How do featured writers and poets view the role of literacy in black bookstore sites? Who is the audience and what are their reasons for participation?
- *Questions dealing with the events*:How are events organized and orchestrated? How do authors use their writing to address their audience? What were the cultural practices or ritualized actions of these events, especially those involving literacy?

Writers and poets at Carol's Books and Marcus Books were supported in unparalleled ways in these settings, and their readers reaped the benefits of this support by participating in a personalized reading. Part of the dual or secondary degree was an appreciation for the mastery of written and spoken language, or what one participant referred to as "getting a grip on words." Another part of earning the dual degree involved parents exposing their children to "literary images." For some parents, the events were an extended part of their homeschooling curriculum, while for others,

these events supplemented their child's education with information about black writers perceived as "missing" from the school curriculum.

**"Unexpected Sources": Literacy Learning in Out-of-School Settings**

Creating alternative and supplementary knowledge spaces for learning, and literacy learning in particular, is part of the history of African Americans in the United States. In a comprehensive study of the "lost history" of African American readers and writers, McHenry (2002:10) contends that people of African descent instituted their own forums for engaging in literacy practices due to the "inferior quality" of public education for students of African descent or "denied access" to formal educational institutions over time. McHenry tells the story of Kathryn Johnson, an African American bookseller who used her Ford coupe to transport books to black people throughout the northern and southeastern United States as early as 1922. According to McHenry (2002:11), Johnson selected materials that she thought black people "ought to read," including poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar and historian W. E. B. DuBois. McHenry argues that Johnson, who referred to herself as an "itinerant bookseller," is one of many examples of the need to examine out-of-school contexts:

> What is confirmed by Kathryn Johnson's story is that evidence attesting to the activities of black readers may come from *unexpected sources*. It also suggests that to understand black readers, then and now, we must be willing to expand our notion of the very definition of literature and literacy, and their functions in different historical periods. [2002:11, emphasis added]

Histories of African American literacy practices demonstrate how "unexpected sources" were at the forefront of defining what it meant to be literate. For example, in the 19th century, literature for African Americans not only included prose and poetry but also other texts, including pamphlets and speeches (Peterson 1995). In her analysis of African American poetry, Brown (1999) asserts that orality was valued as an act of literacy because most early written texts by people of African descent were meant to be shared orally with specific audiences in mind. Building on this historical work and McHenry and Heath's (1994) research on the African American "literate and literary" of the 19th and early 20th centuries, I examined how the values of black literacy communities, black literary movements, and Independent Black Institutions (Lee 1992) of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s have influenced the "new literate and literary" of the 21st century. This new literate and literary are not only readers, writers, and speakers but also literacy activists who have reimagined venues such as cafés and bookstores as education institutions (Fisher 2003b; 2004).

Challenging the "unchanging equation" of literacy and schooling is not new to literacy research (Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983; Scribner and Cole 1981). Under the rubric of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), recent research blends traditions and insights from sociocultural anthropology, linguistics, and education. The NLS demonstrate the variety of purposes and forms for reading, writing, and speaking across cultural contexts (Hull and Schultz 2002; Mahiri 2004; Street 1984, 1993, 2005). Central to these understandings is Street's (1984) distinction between autonomous and ideological views of literacy: While autonomous views posit literacy as independent from social context, ideological views position literacy as "socially and historically situated, fluid, multiple, and power-linked" (McCarty 2005:xvii–xviii).

As Street underscores, "The ways in which people address reading and writing are . . . rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being" (2005:418). This framework provides a useful theoretical lens to unpack the social context of African American literacy practices. I employ this framework to examine the links between literacy learning and valued knowledge as represented in the narratives of participants in predominately African American literacy spaces.

Research on literacy in out-of-school contexts has been informed by the NLS (Gee 1996; Street 1984, 1993, 2005), the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1974), and activity theory (Scribner and Cole 1981). Hull and Schultz (2002) extensively review each of these disciplinary arenas, positing that literacy research in out-of-school settings "might reflect both certain methodological insights from the ethnography of communication and also the interest in power relations made manifest by the New Literacy Studies" (2002:11–12). Ethnography allows literacy researchers to examine the details of "everyday discursive practices and their organization within larger cultural and historical frames" (McCarty 2005:xxii). This approach informs Major's (2004) study of "shoptalk" in a Midwestern U.S. hair salon, represented as an alternative site for "reading" oral texts in unexpected learning spaces. Studies using similar methods show how hip-hop music and popular culture are incorporated as knowledge in classroom settings (Mahiri 2004; Morrell 2004; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2004). In his ethnographic account of sidewalk culture in New York City's Greenwich Village, Duneier (1999) shows how the sidewalk space, and a black book vendor's table in particular, became a site for engaging in debates about black books while promoting a "reading culture" among an intergenerational clientele. McHenry's historicization of African American literacy practices and Duneier's contemporary portrayals of alternative knowledge spaces tellingly reveal that literacy practices do not begin or end in the conventional setting of the classroom.

The analysis here is part of a larger study of what I call Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs). PLCs are spaces in which people are engaged in reading, writing, and speaking in chosen spaces that include spoken word poetry events, writers' collectives, book clubs, and bookstores. In these learning spaces, written work is created to be shared and performed and to incite discussion, debate, and an oral exchange between author and audience (Fisher 2003a, 2003b). PLCs such as spoken word poetry events and black bookstores are educational institutions that value a particular way of listening and the act of reciprocity between participants (Fisher 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Additionally, I have begun to explore how teachers in urban public high schools have employed practices found in PLCs to create and sustain writing classes in school settings (Fisher 2005).

## Methodology

### *Sites and Participants*

I chose Carol's Books in Sacramento and Marcus Books in Oakland because they represent two distinct perspectives on how black bookstores become education institutions in their communities. Carol's Books focused on local or community-based writers, while Marcus Books typically featured nationally and internationally recognized authors. At the time of the study (2001–2002), Carol's Books was less than ten years old. It was not a "black bookstore" when it opened. Rather, Carol's Books

**Table 1.**
**Sites and participants**

| Sites | Events | Vision/Goals | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Carol's Books:* A family-owned and -operated bookstore and cultural center located in Sacramento, California | Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA): Community-based poets and writers hosted by Staajabu and V. S. Chochezi (known as Straight Out Scribes). This event was free and open to the public. | A space for community organizations to meet, a resource for prospective teachers and classroom teachers, and a venue for up-and-coming as well as established black writers and poets | Featured writers: Sophia, Straight Out Scribes Audience: The Rashad family, the Brown family |
| *Marcus Books:* A family-owned and -operated bookstore with two locations in Oakland and one location (the first) in San Francisco, California | Book-signing events for nationally and internationally recognized writers hosted by the owners. These events were generally free and open to the public; however, some readings required the purchase of one copy of the featured author's book. | "To provide a resource for the black community, to have our own literature accessible and a forum for resolution of community issues through seminars and visiting authors." | Featured writers: M. Datcher, Tina McElroy Ansa Audience: Mr. Young and family, Mrs. Shabazz and family |

evolved as the owner's self-awareness grew and as she identified a need in Sacramento for a bookstore specializing in the histories and people throughout the African Diaspora. In contrast, Marcus Books was founded specifically to carry books "by and about Black people everywhere." Celebrating 30 years of operation at the time of the study, Marcus Books had three locations in northern California, including one in San Francisco and two in Oakland. During the period of this study, Marcus Books moved their author readings from the well-known Oakland store to the third store in the African American Museum and Library of Oakland (AAMLO). Research participants included the organizers of bookstore events, featured poets or authors, and audience participants. It is important to note that audience participants in these settings are not passive; they are considered to be a vital part of the activities (see Table 1).

*Data Collection*

This study is part of a larger ethnographic study of PLCs in northern California, including black bookstores and spoken word poetry venues. The data examined in this article focus on the 2001–2002 "season" (fall 2001 through spring 2002) for both bookstore events. Data included field notes and videotaped events at both bookstores. With one exception (at the interviewee's request), all interviews were audiotaped. Altogether, I gathered approximately 30 hours of usable videotape and 30 hours of usable audiotape from interviews and lectures at the both sites, with the

goal of identifying and accounting for "the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (Street 1984:1). Additionally, I collected flyers, electronic mail announcements, and updates sent by event organizers, books and CDs written and produced by community members, as well as photographs of the events.

Altogether, I interviewed 30 participants; interviewees included audience members, poets, authors, and musicians who shared their work at the sites, as well as event organizers and bookstore owners. I created an interview protocol but allowed for an oral history format in which participants could talk about their backgrounds and experiences as related to their participation in these learning communities. Each interview was approximately one hour in length; some, such as a paired interview with two featured authors, were as long as two hours. Interviews were conducted at participants' homes, my home, or the venue in which the communities gathered. Most interviews were set up independently of the bookstore readings, but in some cases I interviewed participants before or after events, based on participants' availability. If the organizers at individual sites suggested specific community members to consult, I pursued those interviews; otherwise, I approached people after events and shared the goals of my project.

Prior to the study, I had witnessed the evolution of Carol's Books as a public school teacher in Sacramento constantly seeking resources for my students. In my own teaching, I invited local writers such as V. S. Chochezi to my classroom to share their writing and discuss the role of literacy in their lives. I became keenly interested in how writers and poets like Chochezi practiced their craft and the spaces outside of school and work contexts that supported their literacy development. When I began to conceptualize this study nearly three years later, V. S. Chochezi and her mother, Staajabu, conveyed their approval to the McNeal family (Carol's Books owners) and welcomed my presence and my video camera at the Poetry on a Saturday Afternoon (POSA) event. Chochezi and Staajabu provided contacts for featured writers prior to the events so I could make arrangements for interviews and filming. As a graduate student, I found Marcus Books to be a critical source for reading and research materials. However, I did not have the same familiarity with the owners or participants. At both sites, I introduced myself and my project to authors and audience participants. Over time, participants would introduce me to others who they believed could offer insight; people learned about my study by "word of mouth" and volunteered to be interviewed.

**Analysis**

The primary objective of this analysis is to show how PLCs, and specifically black bookstores, work as a whole as well as to examine individual contributions to the making and maintenance of such communities. For research questions about the organization and orchestration of the bookstores and event organizers and community members' roles, I coded my field notes and video footage for recurring patterns of organization or consistent actions that organizers performed in setting up the events. The second phase of data analysis was guided by an examination of cultural practices, including those specific to the literate and literary traditions of these communities. For the purposes of this research, I define cultural practices as ritualized or consistent actions of event organizers, artists, and audience participants that were valued among the entire community, such as blended traditions of spoken

word, written work, conversations, and discussions as well as an expectation for everyone's participation and writer/poet traditions of engaging the community at both bookstores. While analyzing data, I became increasingly interested in the way community members saw themselves as being a part of a larger continuum of people of color committed to "the word" with respect to being readers, writers, poets, or supporters of all of the above. One particularly salient theme that emerged from the data was how these sites and their events served as alternative knowledge spaces for members of the community: The bookstores were social and educational spaces that provided activities used to supplement community members' work and school experiences; places to which parents brought their homeschooled children to obtain information about writers and poets of color as well as to receive modeling that was not necessarily found in the schools; and sites for a dual-learning system in which the formal education institutions were valued but not considered enough "education" unless accompanied by a movement to educate oneself about his or her history and culture.

### *"It's Part of the Curriculum": Family Involvement in Carol's Books and Marcus Books*

Mr. Young and many of his peers during his undergraduate career at an Ivy League university in the late 1960s and early 1970s created a forum for students of African descent to meet monthly, discuss their work, and provide feedback to each other. Another important aspect of this group was to develop and disseminate their own reading lists of black authors for their dual degree. Inspired by an African American professor who was known for giving students a wealth of references and resources extending beyond the university setting, Mr. Young compared author events at Marcus Books to the personalized teaching he received from his mentor:

> We took our turns sitting at his feet and let him teach us by talking and he did that very well. He gave people more references and resources and information and provided them with that guidance. In our minds we were doing a dual degree. We were doing the one the university said, "You got to take these courses, you got to do these papers, you got to do these orals to get through," and we said to ourselves, "We got to do these papers, we got to read these books in order to be relevant to our community."

Mr. Young used the imagery of "sitting at the feet" of this professor to reveal the act of reverence toward learning. This mentor not only shared what he knew but also encouraged students to seek out alternative sources of information. The group turned to Marcus Books to find materials for their second program of study. According to Mr. Young, the Marcus Books family also invested in these young scholars. When students were arrested for sit-ins and protests urging the implementation of Black Studies programs in schools and universities during the 1960s, it was the Marcus Books family who put their business on the line to bail out young scholars who were jailed during these activities. In this narrative, Mr. Young conveys his understanding that education at a formal institution ("You got to take these courses, you got to do these papers") had a particular value. However, there was also value in conducting one's own reading and research ("We said to ourselves, 'We got to do these papers, we got to read these books in order to be relevant to our community' "). Participants such as Mr. Young continued to introduce the practice of sitting at the feet of knowledgeable others by bringing their children (and sometimes grandchildren) to Marcus Books events.

Teachers and learners in Carol's Books and Marcus Books represented a range of backgrounds. Both bookstore events had parent participants who wanted to expose their children to black writers and language. Two families at Carol's Books used the bookstore site, and the POSA program in particular, as part of their curriculum for homeschooling. Mrs. Brown, a mother of six young children, sought out Carol's Books as part of her home-school curriculum, a job she shared with her husband and another couple. Although she lived approximately 45 minutes away from Sacramento, Mrs. Brown attended POSA at Carol's Books because it was the closest black bookstore to her home:

> [Attending POSA is] part of the curriculum. It's important to support black-owned businesses, so when I do take [my children] to places like [Carol's Books] we make it an extension of talking about that as far as our social studies. Everything we do is an extension. We have to always keep thinking about that. I'm trying just to expose them to language. In poetry there's an opportunity to understand different things in a short amount of time. You can spend hours talking about a poem like a haiku.

Mrs. Brown's resourceful and purposeful search for an "extension" of the "basics" was one example of parents being proactive about creating a relevant curriculum for their children. Language learning was a priority. Mrs. Brown's children were under the age of ten at the time of the study, so they may not have understood much of the subject matter, but she still wanted them to understand the value of a gathering of readers and writers. Mrs. Brown considered poetry to be interdisciplinary; in addition to writing and reading, she was able to make connections with history and social studies. Mrs. Brown also used POSA as an opportunity to provide her children with modeling for public speaking. Not only did her children listen to the featured poets and writers, they had the chance to watch their mother share her own poetry during the open microphone segment of POSA:

> [Participating in POSA] is to get them exposed to speaking in front of people and they watch everyone's mannerisms. They even watch [my mannerisms] because we do talk about how to be a good speaker and what you need to do—whether you are projecting your voice and looking at your audience and you're speaking clearly and know your material.

Mrs. Brown noted that her children knew when she was nervous as she recited her poetry at POSA; they supported her efforts. The children also gave their mother feedback when she finished sharing her work. Mrs. Brown wanted her children to be equally as skilled orally as they were in reading and writing.

The staff writer for a city newspaper, Mrs. Shabazz, explained that after work she picked up her two sons from school in Sacramento; they drove to Oakland for a reading at Marcus Books. Mrs. Shabazz, who contributed articles about black writers, musicians, and artists who come to Sacramento and surrounding areas, wanted her two teenage sons to see and hear the multiple stories of black writers:

> I always take my children with me, if I can, to listen, to meet black leaders and black writers especially. I always do. I've always done it because they're not going to get that in school and by being inundated with the media and other [negative] images. So I want them to have images—literary images of people who can read and write and think. So I take them [because] I want them to know our story. I want them to know *our* stories from *our* perspectives. And that's how they get it—from black writers and authors.

Mrs. Shabazz's interest in black writers was something she hoped to pass on to her children by introducing them to black "literary images." She also wanted to expose her children to other black readers so they knew and understood that they were part of a larger community of intellectuals. Mrs. Shabazz believed that these activities were not included in the curriculum at her children's schools; therefore, she chose to supplement her children's learning experiences through activities at the bookstore. Mrs. Shabazz contended that children of African descent had to experience these settings so that they could realize their "full humanity" and believed it was her responsibility to create such opportunities. Like many participants, Mrs. Shabazz believed that negative media imagery of blacks was pervasive, often overshadowing events such as those that took place at Marcus Books and Carol's Books:

> Words make people. That's what we are. *Words make people*. Those are the images that create us, you know. So if you got the word "lazy" or you got the word "beautiful," that helps you form your identity in yourself. What else can you do but pay homage to the word? Follow the word and the right word because the wrong word creates false people. So we're looking for the right word. We've had the wrong word.

Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Shabazz used these alternative spaces for two different reasons. For Mrs. Shabazz, the education in black bookstores was used to supplement school-based education, helping individuals gain a more informed perspective on the identity, history, culture, and intellectual legacy of black people. For Mrs. Brown, however, this education was an alternative institution or part of a homeschooling effort that ranged from exploring subjects such as history, social studies, and literature to developing specific skills such as public speaking, self-presentation, and writing. Another aspect of the education found in black bookstores such as Carol's Books and Marcus Books was that young people were given explicit examples and models of writers, poets, readers, and speakers of the word. Exposure was a valuable lesson. Immersing a young mind in these settings with the "right word" or words that revealed a legacy of thinking, exploring, and feeling was as deliberate as lecturing in front of a class.

### *"We've Just Begun to Use the Language": Mastering and Reclaiming Language at Carol's Books*

Layla and Kai Rashad consistently brought their three daughters to POSA; they both appreciated the intergenerational nature of POSA, consciously seeking out events where their elementary school–aged children were welcomed. Mrs. Rashad felt that although community members' ages varied, there was one common interest: "I think the love of language is the unifying theme." Staajabu, one of the co-organizers of POSA along with her daughter V. S. Chochezi (together known as Straight Out Scribes), strongly believed that people of African descent only recently began to use the English language in a way that was meaningful for them. The strong presence of black bookstores and poetry events exemplified this grasp of language:

> First of all, we weren't allowed to read or write until about 150 years ago. People were under penalty of death or incarceration [if they tried] to read or write. I think it's a natural evolution for us that we've gotten a grip on the words that were not ours originally. We just learned to use the words and get real creative with [them]. We've just begun to use the language. Shakespeare had his good time with the language in his time and we're gonna do the same thing.

Staajabu theorized that the renewed interest in poetry was part of a new confidence with language for African Americans. Using Shakespeare as an example of a canonical figure who "had his good time with the language in his time," Staajabu believed it was time for African Americans to do the same. Straight Out Scribes often demonstrated the ability to get a "grip on the words" and to be "real creative" with them; they were willing to take risks with their own poetry and performance and model these for their audience. POSA always began and concluded with both mother and daughter reading their original work. V. S. Chochezi and her mother, Staajabu, introduced and concluded POSA with a poetry duet; mother and daughter would recite individual pieces that "spoke to" each other simultaneously. V. S. Chochezi (1997) recited her poem "Language" in Spanish the first time through and then in English, as Staajabu (2001) read her "Earth Day" poem, paying tribute to her daughter's talent as a writer:

| V. S. Chochezi | Staajabu |
|---|---|
| I want to write in all/<br>the languages of the world. | A Black Woman Poet is a catalyst |
| I want to speak all/<br>the languages of the world. | She is a warriorette, a sheroe, a shrine |
| I want to think in a language/<br>different than that of the enslavers. | A Black Woman Poet can word up/<br>like nobody else and you know/<br>I'm right day or night |
| I am a daughter of Africa . . . | A Black Woman Poet can spin a yarn/<br>that'll take you someplace you've never been. |

Straight Out Scribes performed this piece in many different ways; however, the goal remained the same. Scribes wanted to show participants how they respected each other's ability and passion to experiment with words and sounds. Scribes self-published collections of their work and also recorded a CD; they wanted their work to be read *and* heard. Merging their two poems in a "duet" form was one example of having "fun" with the language. V. S. Chochezi challenged herself to translate her poem into Spanish (which she acknowledged as a work in progress) and to perform in English and Spanish. This also was an example of what Staajabu referenced as getting a "grip on the words" or using the words and language with innovation.

Similarly, one of both bookstores' featured authors, Michael Datcher, saw black bookstores as supporting the power of language:

> If you can use the language in a way that is interesting and different, powerful, people will respect that, and so for a bookstore to deal in the production of black creation, of black imagination, it's a symbol of hope because with education comes the opportunity to advance in life and to uplift the race if you would.

This was demonstrated in Datcher's ability to fulfill multiple roles at both Carol's and Marcus Books. Datcher not only read from his national bestseller *Raising Fences: A Black Man's Love Story* (Datcher 2001) but also read poetry and engaged his audience in discussions about the relationship between music and writing.

A second important aspect of being able to get a "grip on the words" was finding one's voice in literature and poetry. Sophia, a featured poet and writer at Carol's

Books, grew up "hating" poetry. "The poetry I was exposed to was always in this language I couldn't get with," she said. It wasn't until Sophia's young adult life that she developed an appreciation for poetry. Her narrative of discovering her voice and language in poetry and prose was one that she believed repeatedly resurfaced with people of color:

> None of our voices are taught in the schools. And if you look back you can see Langston Hughes said it, Toni Morrison said it, James Baldwin said it, Nikki Giovanni said it—even Sherman Alexie said it . . . that it wasn't until they were grown adults in the university poking around *on their own* that they find that their own people were writing, you know? Sekou Sundiata said, "I didn't know that you could say 'with yo' bad self' " in a poem and it was Baraka who taught him that, you know? So many of us were avoiding that [African American] tradition because it was a tradition invisible in schools. [emphasis added]

Embedded in Sophia's narrative is the process of using one's personal language as a scaffold for reading, writing, and speaking to a wider audience. Most importantly, Sophia calls attention to the need for people of color to hear voices in literature that mirror and affirm their own. She used Sundiata's testimony of hearing poet and playwright Amiri Baraka's use "with yo' bad self" as a moment for opening the possibilities in writing; Sophia and the writers she cited were not exposed to writers who shared their background until they conducted their own research. The bookstores valorized this knowledge. Citing writers of African and Native American descent such as Hughes, Morrison, Baldwin, Giovanni, and Alexie, who have come to be widely read, Sophia affirmed that they too sought out writers and voices that they could understand, recognize, and use to enhance their own writing styles. A writing instructor at a community college, Sophia also taught writing and poetry in California prisons. She shared that prisoners were frustrated with her when she discouraged them from making all of their poetry rhyme. The English language, she believed, restricted many of these men who had limited training:

> The English language won't let us rhyme. There is no rhyme in our lives. [Our lives] are too complicated. Our lives are too complex, too controversial, too beautiful . . . what's going on in Oakland, what's going on in Oak Park [an urban community in Sacramento], what's going on in Detroit—you can't rhyme that. You can't rhyme that stuff.

Getting a "grip on words" was a key aspect of community members' participation at Carol's Books. Members of these communities shared a general love of language and words as well as a passion to use words and language in powerful ways. Acknowledging the tenuous relationship that people of African descent once had with the English language and the potential to heal that chasm through literacy-centered events and activities at community institutions such as Carol's Books and Marcus Books, Staajabu declared it was now time for the community to have fun with the language across genres of writing and styles. Additionally, language was viewed as a primary vehicle for voice and experience; the employment of black English was not vilified but used for emphasis and validation of voices.

*Returning to the "Village Forum": Making a Statement at Marcus Books*

During the study, Marcus Books opened a third store in collaboration with the African American Museum and Library of Oakland (AAMLO), which housed a reference library, archives, and museum space with a permanent exhibit on the

contributions of black people to California. Rick Moss, the head curator at AAMLO, considered the merger between the AAMLO and Marcus a "tremendous combination." Mr. Moss believed that even though people were living fast-paced lives and could access information quickly, they sometimes needed to stop and read a good book:

> Sometimes we just have to stop, relax, sit back, and just read a good book and listen to what people are saying, dialoguing, talking, conversing . . . about the things that concern us all. Having Marcus here gives us an opportunity to have a *village forum* where we can come together and talk about issues in a natural setting where no one has to agree . . . but no one should be fearful about expressing. [emphasis added]

Moss's depiction of a "village forum" was accurate. At approximately 6:30 p.m. on Thursday and Friday nights, and sometimes weekend days, men and women would converge on the AAMLO building in the middle of their featured exhibit to see authors and poets whom they admired or wanted to learn more about. Many people wore suits as if they had just left work; others toted satchels and backpacks as if they just had left school. People were prepared with questions and came with their book clubs. Parents such as Mrs. Shabazz brought their children to these readings, even though the authors did not specialize in children's literature. Although the texts were not "age-appropriate" for children, the emphasis was on children seeing, hearing, and meeting various authors and learning to be a part of a community of readers.

Many of the writers spent most of their time discussing issues they believed relevant to the entire community, rather than focusing on their own writings. Author and screenwriter Tina McElroy Ansa returned to Marcus Books with enthusiasm and warmth as she acknowledged her personal and professional relationship with the Marcus Books family. Mrs. McElroy Ansa was promoting her (2002) novel *You Know Better*; however, she was more passionate about exploring controversial topics emerging from her writing with the Marcus Books community. The topics that Mrs. McElroy Ansa liked to discuss, she explained, caused many people "to get their coats and hats and leave dinner parties" because they did not want to talk about serious issues. Among these issues was the commercialization of African and African American culture and a perceived distance between elders and youth in the community, which she partially held members of her generation responsible for, for "dropping the ball" with youth. One of her strategies to combat these topics was using literature as a mediating tool for discussion. Mrs. McElroy Ansa considered discomfort more important than pretentious chatter if it meant confronting issues for people of African descent when a forum was present.

McElroy Ansa's (1996) novel *The Hand I Fan With* marked the return of her fictional town of Mulberry, Georgia, and a female protagonist who conjured a male companion through a "supernatural ritual." As McElroy Ansa discussed the character, Lena McPherson, members of the community smiled widely at the mention of McPherson's "ghost" companion, Herman. Once McElroy Ansa connected with the community through her characters, she expressed her anger that aspects of black spirituality had been commercialized in film and television. McElroy Ansa believed that "ghost stories" that were originally told to convey moral lessons had been transformed into "nigger jokes" in horror films. Addressing the audience, she said:

> And I started thinking about this. This is just so rich. It's a literary device, it's a cultural device. . . . I started looking at the larger culture and looking at how black people and ghosts

> were perceived. And I thought to myself, "They turned my culture into a nigger joke." When I was growing up in the 50s and the 60s . . . when ghost stories were mentioned it was about some richness, and texture, and my culture.

After acknowledging young people in the audience who might be considering a career in writing, she changed the focus from her novel to the experiences that led to her writing, emphasizing that (1) aspects of one's culture, such as storytelling, should be considered as possible sources for writing; (2) meeting a "real-life" black writer, John Oliver Killens, while she was in grade school, showed her that becoming an author was possible; and (3) a wealth of stories exists around us, but we need to stop and listen to the way "everyday people" use language. She used the example of her great aunt's "ghost stories," explaining that her great aunt told these stories to demonstrate moral lessons such as "You reap what you sow," or "The way you live is the way you die." She told the audience that she used these aspects of her life growing up in Georgia for her writing:

> This is my culture. This is my stuff. . . . I said, "I'm going to snatch my culture back. Snatch it back!" Once I started doing it I saw what a rich literary device it is to have ghosts and spirits [in my stories] and how richly connected that is with African tradition—the honoring of ancestors.

Forging a link between ghost stories in rural Georgia and ancestral acknowledgment found in some African traditions, McElroy Ansa was determined to "snatch" her culture back and reclaim it through literature. Her personal experience constituted a social commentary on how cultural systems are fragmented and then re-created in images that distort the history. Literature was a way not only to "snatch" the culture back but also to encourage the Marcus Books community that literature was a tool for mediation. Much like Mrs. Shabazz's emphasis that "words make people," McElroy Ansa believed that people of African descent were returning to words and literature for problem solving. Again, addressing the audience, she said:

> At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century we are looking to literature and words to save us once again. We're not looking for solutions because we know nobody has that one solution. We're looking to literature and fiction as a safe place to talk about social issues. It just shocked me that so many book clubs started popping up around this time and that so many people were using, for instance, *Ugly Ways* [a predecessor to *The Hand I Fan With* and *You Know Better* (Ansa 1993)] to talk about their mothers. You start out in a book club because it's a safe place like an umbrella. You start out talking about the characters but before it's over, you end up talking about yourself.

The increased popularity of black book clubs inspired McElroy Ansa to include "readers' companions" in the back of her novels. She explained to the Marcus Books community how literature was a safe place to discuss difficult issues and how the author readings as well as individual book clubs could be used as forums. She then moved into another social commentary about what she understood as a generation gap between youth and elders in the community. As she began to discuss why she wrote the novel she was promoting, McElroy Ansa used vulgarity in some music as an example of how youth were lacking an understanding of the power of words:

> We used to know the power of words and we've sat back and dropped the ball. [We ask ourselves] where did these young people come from? The question I wanted to answer—or at

> least address [in my novel]—was how in one generation did we go from young women, black women, to "bitches". . . . In one generation we went from women who defended themselves to women who identified themselves as that. . . . How in one generation did we go from that? And what does that mean in the larger culture? I was telling my friends about how I have closed down dinner parties, I have broken up dinner parties by talking about this because none of us wants to talk about it and I don't blame us because we are ashamed.

However, McElroy Ansa did not take the familiar stance of blaming youth culture for what she considered a communication problem; she believed men and women of her generation must take responsibility for young people rather than distance themselves. She viewed this as a collective issue that communities such as that affiliated with Marcus Books should address:

> [We ask ourselves], "Where did these people come from?" We've distanced ourselves from them now. We don't want to be around them. We don't like the way they carry themselves. We don't like the way they dance. We don't like their music.... We have completely distanced ourselves from them. We refuse to have that discussion. We refuse to have that discussion about race . . . but we are going to have to have it because we haven't made one step of progress. . . . We have to make that discussion about gender, about homosexuality.

In the novel that she was promoting, McElroy Ansa created a young black female character who needed modeling and the support of older generations. One of the Marcus Books community members expressed his concern that this character reinforced stereotypes of young black women being unprincipled and asked McElroy Ansa if she had any solutions to dealing with the misunderstanding between black elders and youth. McElroy Ansa told the audience:

> We won't begin to get any answers until we do start the discussion about this. . . . And again, the world is different . . . our lives are a lot more complicated but I don't care what the situation is, we still have to deal with it. And again, literature is a safe place for us to begin to talk about it or at least to start a discussion because we can start talking about it without it being about me and you—it can be about [the characters].

McElroy Ansa's purpose at Marcus Books expanded beyond promoting her book and selling more copies. She wanted to continue her tradition of contextualizing her experiences and the experiences of her characters in a larger legacy of African American folkloric traditions, while acknowledging its African ancestry. She also was motivated by what she saw as a return to "the word" and literature for salvation; however, this time salvation was in the form of reading and discussing popular literature. In addition to these two traditions, McElroy Ansa maintained a third tradition to "close down dinner parties" by bringing difficult issues to the forefront of her readings. In this setting, however, no one would leave with their hats and coats until it was over.

**Crafting a New "Program of Study": Implications for Literacy Education**

The purpose of this study was to unpack the role of two black-owned and -operated bookstores in the lives of their participants. An emerging theme from the narratives of featured authors and audience participants at Carol's Books and Marcus Books was a perceived absence in schools of black literary images and relevant knowledge about the multiple experiences and stories of people of African descent. In order to find alternative or supplementary resources, poets, authors, and parents

strategically and purposefully sought out venues such as the bookstores in this study to immerse themselves, and in some cases their children, in oral and written representations of black voices. In the opening of this article, Mr. Young described the phenomenon of black people using black bookstores for education centers as earning a secondary or dual degree. Adapting terminology typically reserved for institutions of higher education, Mr. Young appropriated the term "dual degree" to signify the need "to craft another program of study important to black people." Using the concept of dual degrees and the narratives of participants such as Mr. Young as navigational tools for understanding these sites reveals a critical link between literacy and knowledge. In other words, participants wanted literature and the presentation of that literature to reflect ways of being and valuing found in black contexts throughout the African Diaspora.

This study adds to existing research on the extension of black education beyond formal institutions of schooling. This study also uniquely offers a window into participants' keen interest in how literacy and knowledge are presented, shared, and exchanged in the acts of reading, writing, and speaking. POSA, for example, offered an immersion experience for all participants. Not only did POSA present featured authors, it also enabled audience members to read their original work. V. S. Chochezi considered this total inclusion of audience to be essential to the Carol's Books community:

> I perceived Carol's Books as a forum to introduce new readers to an audience, to give them an opportunity. We have a lot of first-time people who have never read [their work] before. It's a place where they can feel comfortable coming and sharing their work before an appreciative audience. I also see it as a forum for people to come and discuss issues that are important, to come and make announcements about what they are doing. It's their program.

Histories of African American literacy practices demonstrate how people *had* to create learning spaces outside of schools. However, current literacy practices, such as those at these black bookstores, show how participants *choose* to organize literacy communities in order to meet personal educational expectations.

I began this study using ethnographic methods to inquire into and describe the features of PLCs, specifically black bookstores. However, I am also asserting that literacy educators can learn from this "new program of study" and the ways in which it allows knowledge to be presented. PLCs have multiple functions that make literacy learning desirable and accessible. One function is exposure to experienced writers and poets. In this study, families wanted their children to meet and hear black writers read from their work. In effect, parents were saying, "If you can see it, you can be it." Literature and poetry did not have to be age-appropriate because there was as much to learn from how a writer addressed the audience as from the texts themselves. McElroy Ansa, for example, told the audience her story about meeting John Oliver Killens as a young student; her purpose in retelling the story was to convey that seeing and meeting a black author incited her own desire and passion to write.

A second function of PLCs is the forum-like quality in which everyone is invited to participate. In many ways, this echoes Freire's (2003) critique of the "banking model" approach to teaching; POSA's format created a dialectic engagement between the audience and the author. At different points during POSA, participants' roles shifted, acknowledging and respecting every participant's contribution.

A third function, and one that needs further investigation in both historical accounts of African American literacy practices as well as current practices, is the opportunity for intergenerational learning among adults and children. Intergenerational learning communities such as Carol's Books and Marcus Books foster a culture of reciprocity in which everyone has a sense of responsibility for teaching and learning.

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## Notes

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1. In the epilogue to *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, McHenry (2002) discusses publishers' sudden interest in black bookstores after the success of Terry McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale*. McMillan, according to McHenry, did much of the groundwork for promoting her novel and was able to create and sustain relationships with black booksellers throughout the country.

2. In general, pseudonyms are used for all participants except for published authors whose readings were part of bookstore events. I use the actual names of the two bookstores, Carol's Books and Marcus Books, because they are public institutions and their readings are openly publicized.

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