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Richard Allen and the Prehistory of Engaged Community Learning at HBCUs

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This essay argues that African American church founder Richard Allen (1760-1831) developed a rhetorical pedagogy that prefigures the community literacy partnerships of later Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). While Allen did not enjoy the material opportunities of institutionalized higher learning, we can interpret passages from his autobiography as a rhetorical pedagogy that affirms the ways of knowing in language of his community, suggests a relationship between language and the truth, and points toward a community pedagogy rooted in language. Allen also figures as a rhetor whose own higher literacy is sponsored by his community, and who returns his rhetorical power to the community for its own betterment. These same dimensions can be witnessed in the pedagogies of later nineteenth-century African American educators, particularly that of Fanny Jackson Coppin of the Institute for Colored Youth, and Daniel A. Payne of Wilberforce University. Moreover, Allen's very lack of formalized schooling affords us a way of reframing contemporary efforts in university and community partnerships, and offers compelling precedent for Linda Flower's model of inquiry. For African American higher learning, community literacy partnerships are not merely an additive element of a traditional curriculum; instead, they are the lifeblood of the school itself.

Where did the HBCU and its community partnerships come from? Movements emerge from the imaginations and efforts of people first; only later are movements codified in formal



institutions. Who were the people who first imagined the union of community practices and the ideals of higher learning? How did they conceive of this partnership in the face of social and economic obstacles? Here I explore the community literacy pedagogy of Richard Allen (1760-1831), Philadelphia preacher and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen was not part of an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) because they did not exist when he was alive. However, I argue that Allen prefigures the community engagement impetus of the HBCU. He developed a rhetorical pedagogy that was rooted in the needs of his community, and which called the community to its own material empowerment, as well as to a sophisticated epistemology of the ways of language and truth. In revealing how Allen prefigures the community partnership mission of the HBCU, I suggest that a rhetorical and pedagogical ideal existed for African American leaders and their communities well before they managed to assemble the economic and cultural capital to found and lead HBCUs. This ideal may be defined as the integration of higher learning and community literacy. I trace this ideal through the work of two of Allen's pedagogical successors, Fanny Jackson Coppin and Daniel A. Payne. Unlike mainstream white university efforts, which have struggled to break free of the polarities between the ivory tower and the communities around them, HBCUs' ideal of learning never separated the two in the first place. Thus they point towards a provocative framework for contemporary work in community literacy.

Historiographic Approaches to Community Literacy

Making Richard Allen the subject of a study of the HBCU does warrant attention to historiographic questions. Allen's ministry occurred in a time in U.S. history before many of today's colleges and universities, regardless of cultural origin, had been founded. While Philadelphia was a center of higher learning because of the presence of the University of Pennsylvania, the proliferation of colleges in the area founded by particular denominations had not yet occurred. Thus the historian of



higher education must look beyond bricks and mortar institutions if she is to recognize the ways that the early national period contributed to later developments. Moreover, historians of the African American past, from John Hope Franklin to Annette Gordon-Reed and John Ernest, have persuaded us of the necessity of alternative research methods to write the history of a people who have been denied access to the materials with which the past is preserved. These two methodological considerations combined suggest that a figure such as Richard Allen, who was reading, writing, preaching, and organizing in his community, can be justifiably understood as an early contributor to the movement that would become the HBCUs of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In fact, without assigning causation, we can recognize in the nineteenth century the continuing development of the particular vision of community and higher literacy that Allen first articulated. The HBCU came into existence not long after Allen's life: Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the oldest HBCU, was founded in 1837 in Philadelphia. Cheyney's original embodiment, the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY), was an African American high school in Philadelphia that was founded and overseen by Quakers, but was most successfully directed by AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church leader Fanny Jackson Coppin in the later quarter of the nineteenth century. Coppin, as I will examine later in this article, can be understood as having extended the model of higher and community literacy that Allen first imagined. Educator and AME bishop Daniel A. Payne also envisioned a pedagogy of the highest standards of academic literacy that would simultaneously lift up the African American community as a whole.

Besides the temporal proximity of Allen's life work to the emergence of the formal HBCU, historians must also recognize the role of the church in the community and in higher education. As Beverly Moss points out, because the church is central in the broader African American community, it "cannot easily be separated from secular institutions and . . . sacred-secular distinctions are complicated" (18). In examining



institutional histories such as the HBCU, then, we must include churches among those institutions. In particular, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, which Allen had founded in 1799, lies at the heart of community literacy partnerships and HBCUs. The ICY, as I mentioned, had ties to the AME through principal Fanny Jackson Coppin. The AME church, under the leadership of Daniel A. Payne, founded the school that would later be named Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1843, which would then grant the first baccalaureate degree in an HBCU in 1856. Thus Allen and his AME community at Mother Bethel seem to have paved the way for a rich pedagogical tradition. In contrast, back in Pennsylvania, the Ashmun Institute, later Lincoln University, was founded by Presbyterians in 1854; while it is another of the oldest HBCUs, the impetus behind its founding differs markedly from the promise of higher forms of literacy and community uplift that characterized the pedagogy at Wilberforce, the Institute for Colored Youth, and, originally, of Richard Allen. In other words, we can recognize and appreciate an emerging tradition, starting with the words of Richard Allen, of a model of rhetorical education and community partnerships that extend through the nineteenth century, and that has strong associations with the AME.

One final aspect of my historiographic understanding comes out of our own field's rich history and historiographic arguments regarding rhetoric and language. In other words, conceiving of rhetoric as a way of doing history has allowed us to privilege rhetorical "moves" over concrete material shifts, and to see material things such as university buildings as context rather than as central. This approach contrasts with that of a historian of education who would look first to formal institutional structure, and then to texts. This rhetorical orientation has proved especially rich and fruitful in revising histories of marginalized people, including women and ethnic minorities, and in particular, African American rhetoric and its meaning in U.S. society. In fact, scholarship of African American rhetoric and literacy in general reveals to us the remarkable consistency of rhetorical positioning across time, regardless of changing material contexts. This positioning can be seen from the



earliest preserved expressions of the desire for freedom in the nascent African American community, even while still largely in slavery. Jacqueline Jones Royster articulates this rhetorical positioning in her study of literacy among African American women.¹ She writes that “the historical lack of status and privilege permitted women of African descent in American society has dictated that the hermeneutic space”—what Royster calls “the mandate to make sense” where there is no sense (59)—“has functioned fundamentally as a rhetorical one” (60). When we recognize “language use as the primary instrument for instituting the adjustment or the change, the significance of a series of language acts becomes more evident” (60). In particular, Royster sees African American women’s use of literacy “as an instrument for producing spiraling effects in both sociopolitical thought and sociopolitical action” (43). While Royster is careful to say that African American women do not encounter literacy as a monolith, her methodology is so careful that it does not seem out of hand to put her perspective to use in a study of the writing of an African American man as well. His literacy, and his involvement in his community’s forms of literacy, indeed produced “spiraling effects” at future HBCUs and their community partnerships. As a moment in rhetorical history, Allen enacts his own temporal moment while also speaking prophetically to the material changes that would come, in fits and starts, as his successors in rhetoric continued the work of speaking truth to power. Higher education is a rhetorical ideal that extends from Allen’s vision, whether or not the HBCU has buildings, faculty, and bank accounts to do community literacy. Allen speaks to that ideal, a space where intellectual leaders and community members come together to make change using language.

1 See also work by Bacon, Condit and Lucaites, Holmes, Howard-Pitney, Logan, and Richardson and Jackson.



Allen as Rhetor and Theorist of Rhetoric

Allen was born in 1760 and was a slave on a farm in Delaware; after buying his freedom, he became a traveling preacher and eventually settled in Philadelphia where he founded Mother Bethel church, which was not the first but one of the most successful African American churches of its time. Mother Bethel was founded as a result of a series of events that began with the swift and traumatic break with the city's historic Methodist congregation of St. George. Later, Allen became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church denomination, as Mother Bethel and a number of other African American congregations decided to split completely from the Methodists. The AME is known as the first American denomination to have been founded in response to social conditions, rather than theological differences. Allen's expressed philosophy and the narrative of his actions in the face of oppression together form the vision of community engaged learning that I see as a historical model. These ideas and actions are preserved in Allen's autobiography.

While published in 1833 after his death, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, is a book written, arranged, and commissioned by Allen himself (Newman 276). The first third of the book is a narrative of his life, written at the end of his life for inclusion in this collection, and tells of his childhood in slavery, his coming to religion, his emancipation, his early years as an itinerant preacher, and his arrival in Philadelphia. Most famously, Allen recounts the story of his and Absalom Jones's walk out from St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia and the subsequent founding of St. Thomas African Church, an African American congregation in the Episcopal church, and Mother Bethel, the first church in the denomination that would become the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Still in its original location in Philadelphia's old city, St. George's in the 1780s was a thriving congregation with a healthy mix of white and African American members. One Sunday morning in 1787, Allen



writes, congregants were on their knees in prayer during a regular Sunday morning service. A white member approached fellow African American preacher Absalom Jones, pulled him to his feet from prayer, and told him to move to the balconies. These new balconies had been built—with the labor of African American members—to accommodate the growing number of churchgoers, also made up largely of African American congregants. There had been no sense prior to that Sunday, Allen suggests, that the seating arrangements of the congregation would begin to be segregated with the balcony addition.² In a dramatic turn, all the African American worshippers left immediately that Sunday morning. They soon founded their own congregation, the St. Thomas African Church, led by Jones. They voted to align with the Episcopal church, against Allen's wishes to remain with the Methodists.³ Allen complied, but not for long. In 1793, Allen, insisting that Methodism offered the richest religious focus for African Americans, left this group and founded his own Methodist congregation of Bethel. This congregation that eventually became known as Mother Bethel later became the center of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, founded in 1799, of which Allen was first bishop.⁴

For all the drama that this story contributes to the long narrative of African American movements for freedom and self-determination, what is fascinating for a study of community literacy is what Allen has to say

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- 2 Alfred Day, the current pastor at St. George's, and historian Dee Andrews recognize some factual discrepancies regarding the year that this event really took place, as the balconies were not built until 1792, according to church records; one wonders, then, if there really was such a singular defining event as this, especially as the church records make no mention of it. From a literary standpoint, it may be enough to recognize the power of narrative over the messy and indeterminate accumulation of events that result in recognizable change in real life (Day 4-5).
 - 3 The still-existing St. Thomas Church is now in the Overbrook section of Philadelphia.
 - 4 Mother Bethel too remains an active congregation on South Sixth Street in Philadelphia, the oldest parcel of land in the U.S. continuously owned by African Americans. For full accounts of the series of events that surrounded the eventual founding of the AME, and Allen and Jones's prior work together with the Free African Society, see Dee Andrews, Newman, George, or Raboteau.



about being a Methodist. His thinking on Methodism, in fact, is the central evidence in my argument that Allen can be understood as an early figure in African American community literacy and higher education. What he reveals is no less than a rhetorical theory, and one oriented towards pedagogy. Speaking to the peers who felt they would be better protected politically with the Episcopalians, Allen's defense centers on the style and approach of Methodism:

I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the coloured people as well as the Methodist; for the plain and simple gospel truth suits best for any people, for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand; and the reason that the Methodist is so successful in the awakening and conversion of the coloured people, the plain doctrine and having a good discipline....The Methodists were the first people that brought glad tidings to the coloured people. I feel thankful that ever I heard a Methodist preach. We are beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high-flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine. Sure am I that reading sermons will never prove so beneficial to the coloured people as spiritual or extempore preaching. (16)

A complete rhetorical theory emerges in the passage above. Allen demonstrates thoughtfulness and respect towards his audience; he reveals an epistemology that recognizes a "Gospel truth" over and above the means of its expression, and that "truth" is rooted in ethics (or more accurately, theology); he presents a model of delivery; he orients his thinking towards pedagogy; and he indicates an appreciation for his predecessors in working out this rhetorical theory, the Methodists. Not Aristotle, Cicero, nor Quintilian—or for that matter, Augustine—do much more than that, nor would we find many more themes than these in any selection in Bizzell and Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition*. And if so much rhetorical theory amounts to the primary purpose of higher



education in the liberal arts, then it's fair to argue that Allen prefigures the ideals of the HBCU, especially those oriented towards the liberal arts: to educate African Americans as leaders and to empower the community. It is not a pedagogy that simply expresses an interest in community needs. What we find here is a rhetorical pedagogy rooted in the ways of knowing of the community itself.

Allen's ideas about the language come from a felt sense of the role of language in religion and community; for him, there is something "plain and simple" about Methodist language that makes difficult concepts accessible for everyone. The truth, he is careful to suggest, does not belong to any one denomination, and therefore he implies that truth does not reside in language but rather exists elsewhere, *a priori*. But people can only know the truth through the workings of language and therefore wisdom must be transmitted in forms and channels appropriate to the receivers. Perhaps some people can respond to the style of the Presbyterian liturgy, he implies, but not his people. Indeed, whites were scandalized by the noisy, active behavior of black-only congregations. Allen recognized that his community would not absorb the Gospel ideals of charity and love, and become models of personal responsibility and moral fortitude, unless they could learn the texts in their own way, through "spiritual and ex tempore preaching." Shevaun Watson characterizes African Methodist practice as a "testimony of the body" that challenges "the authenticity of the conversion itself, the truth of these blacks' salvation" to a white audience because "they did not testify to the experience in a way that was deemed legitimate or real"; that is, they did not describe their conversion in eighteenth-century standards of eloquence (33). They "act[ed] illiterate," as far as white onlookers were concerned (66). But their literacy was owned collectively, in the performance of the preacher, in the responses of the congregation, and in the actions made possible by rhetorical and literate events.⁵

5 See also, for instance, the shared literacy of literary clubs as characterized by Elizabeth McHenry.



Besides defending Methodism to an outside audience, Allen performs a role as master rhetor. Allen's assertion of his and his people's identities as Methodists is established rhetorically as a repetition, specifically something closest to the figure *traductio*, "repeating the same word variously through a sentence or thought" (*Silva Rhetoricae*). "I feel thankful I ever heard a Methodist preach," (16) he says, and "we are beholden to the Methodists" (16); on the next page, "I could not be any thing else but a Methodist, as I was born and awakened under them, and I could go no further with them, for I was a Methodist" (17). On the literal level, he is explaining his differences with the new congregation of St. Thomas, who had felt that a more responsible move would be to align with the Episcopalians. But his insistence speaks to a more fundamental issue of identity. He asserts himself vigorously against the violation of the leaders of St. George's who had forced Absalom Jones and then the other African Americans, including Allen, to move from their seats; when they then began their own congregation and rented a storehouse for worship, receiving a large sum of cash support from Robert Ralston and Benjamin Rush, they were threatened with being turned out of the denomination altogether. The *traductio* shores up his claim like so many blows on a railroad spike.

If the figure of repetition begins to reveal Allen's *metis* in the art of rhetoric, it is only the beginning of Allen's claim for legitimacy, which puts down deep roots in the metaphors and practices of literacy. Here he reveals how the actions of even the loosely organized Methodists were profoundly rooted in material texts. In this incident, after the group had already solicited support from Benjamin Rush and Robert Ralston and established their own African church, the white Methodist leadership continued to attempt to halt their practice.

But the elder of the Methodist church still pursued us. Mr. J--- M--- called upon us and told us if we did not erase our names from the subscription paper, and tore up the paper, we would be publicly turned out of meeting. We asked him if we had violated any law



of discipline by so doing. He replied, “I have a charge given to me by the Conference, and unless you submit I will read you publicly out of meeting.” We told him we were willing to abide by the discipline of the Methodist church; “and if you will show us where we have violated any law of discipline of the Methodist church, we will submit; and if there is not rule violated in the discipline, we will proceed on.” He replied, “I will read you all out.”He told us we were not Methodists, and left us. (14-15).

Mr. M--- sounds like a fool, a stock character who sees rules and regulations as superior to common sense and decency. Allen assumes a stance of innocence and earnestness that plays up all the more the clear hypocrisy of the white church member. And he goes one better on Mr. M--- and his claims to legitimacy by calling up what Deborah Brandt calls a documentarian society, in which rights to action proceed from written texts. Allen could have responded by assuming an ethos of innocence and poverty (please let us poor people worship), ignorance (I’m sorry we can’t read the rules of discipline; how could we know), or moral superiority (we follow the precepts of Christ, not of man). Instead, he asserts his rights using the same weapon of text, asking a rhetorical question: where have we violated the rules? He can only ask this question, of course, because he knows that he has violated nothing; he knows this because he is fully literate and informed of the nature of the rules.

This fragment of text, which gives us only a hint of the full range of the work of Allen himself and of his church, speaks also to the model of the African American preacher that Beverly Moss describes in her ethnographic study of contemporary churches. She emphasizes that congregations “want their ministers to be educated, to have academic credentials. They want their ministers to be good with language. Verbal agility is highly valued” (83). But being “good with language” means much more than performing the role of Standard English speaker; it means being able “to ‘sound Black,’” (83), to speak the language of the



community in order to lift up the community. We cannot know how Allen sounded or how people experienced his preaching. However, his written narrative, even while displaying the Standard English of its time, is a text of subtle and persuasive rhetorical form. It is powerful, and its narrative reveals Allen's intimate understandings of the demands of literacy in its most advanced forms. In terms of the expectations within the African American community that the African American minister be agile with language, Allen measures up. His historical place as a speaker for his community, paired with the rhetorical pedagogy suggested by his words, point to the model of community partnership seen in two subsequent HBCUs of the nineteenth century.

Literacy and Learning in the AME and at Early HBCUs

Richard Allen's rhetorical pedagogy speaks to his entire community; it brings together community ideals of language and literacy and ideals of community betterment. We can understand it as a pedagogy of higher learning because it harbors a sophisticated epistemology of the relationship between language, truth, and action, and the role of advanced literacy within that matrix. And his own life and words are a beacon for the community; he offered a vision of an institution that would bring the community to its own actualization. Moreover, as a historic event in connection with other historical developments, I see Allen's rhetorical pedagogy as the beginning of a responsive pedagogy that can be identified in several African American institutions of the nineteenth century. One notable leader of this century and the city of Philadelphia is Fanny Jackson Coppin, who was Principal of the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) in Philadelphia from 1870 to 1902.

Like Allen, Coppin faced direct opposition to her work in her community by the white overseers of her institution. The Institute for Colored Youth was founded by Quaker Richard Humphries in 1837. From the time Coppin arrived there as head of the Female Department in 1860 until she retired in 1902, the Quaker Board of Managers challenged every decision



she made (Perkins). Yet she persisted in developing a curriculum that integrated the community need for practical education in the trades with a high level of learning in the literate arts. Under her direction, the school adopted an academic model with the expectation that African American students would achieve the same levels of literacy as their white counterparts. While the school had little money for textbooks, Coppin expected the faculty to know the material well enough to teach it without books. She developed her own teaching methods, such as a poem that helped student learn the parts of speech, and another of the Ten Commandments (Perkins 130). She loved the classics, and took pride in her students' knowing them, but when she saw the requirements of the teacher's examination, she devoted herself to the "English" studies that her students would need to become teachers, and to the methods of teaching and classroom management that characterize a normal school curriculum.

After Emancipation, schools for African Americans were mandated, and many new teachers were needed. The ICY became the primary source for teacher training, educating three-quarters of all African American teachers in Philadelphia and nearby Camden, New Jersey. The students passed the state qualifying exams at high rates, and when they didn't, Coppin revised the curriculum and the teaching standards so that they did. She also promoted an industrial curriculum, but one that was tied to the literate arts; she writes in her autobiography, "There is, in my opinion, no incompatibility between higher learning and work" (Coppin 61). In addition to her work in the school, Coppin made it a point to reach out to members of the community who were not involved in the school as parents; she gave lectures on courage, service, health, hygiene, and preventive medicine (Perkins138), and she wrote regularly for the AME-sponsored newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, establishing a regular women's column in 1878 (Perkins130). She advocated for greater resources for early childhood education, recognizing the cycles of poverty and crime that would be continued without teachers. What Coppin achieved, then, was a comprehensive vision of learning and



community, where students could come for the full range of education that they would need, both mechanical or intellectual, and their education would be returned to the community for its own betterment.

Memorably, Coppin worked to create an inclusive community at the school, which reached into the lives of every member of the African American community in Philadelphia. She convinced the Quaker managers to accept female students, and frequently paid for the boarding of students out of her own pocket. One parent said in 1857, “You cannot think how proud I am of that Institute, and how grateful I am to the managers for its library, its schools, its lectures, and its colored teachers. Oh, it is a great thing for our people” (Perkins 69). The Quaker managers, despite their regular opposition to her decisions, clearly supported her leadership as well, reporting once that “it is very encouraging to report the truly friendly relations which exist in this school, between the teachers and the pupils” (Perkins 158). Viewed through the lens of the HBCU community partnership, we can understand both of these speakers as recognizing that a successful school integrates itself into the community. They point to the idea that a community partnership does not begin by reaching out to the community from within the school, but starts first with the curriculum, pedagogy, and rhetorical ideals of the school itself; in other words, the community partnership is not additive to a traditional curriculum, but integrated into the everyday activities of recruiting students, running classes, and sending graduates back to the community. To articulate these aspects of school life and then build a culture from there is to open and extend the promise of higher forms of literacy well outside the walls of the school.

Like Richard Allen, then, Coppin was both a rhetor and a theorist of learning; she gave her community a voice as a public speaker, and also worked to build institutions that would materially improve the community. These leaders share an identity as consciously called to be rhetors, teachers, and leaders of their people. They share a persistent orientation in curriculum—whether formal school curriculum or style of



religious learning and experience—towards the needs of the community, and especially in the recognition of language as a medium of knowledge that is worth studying and theorizing. Just as Allen recognized the place of a Methodist model of rhetorical epistemology in reaching his community, Coppin recognized the place of learning in literacy even as her community needed vocational training as well.

Another of Allen's successors, Daniel A. Payne, bishop of the AME Church and a founder of Wilberforce University, also recognized this need. He purchased Wilberforce College in Xenia, Ohio, without the consent of the AME leadership, in 1863. Church historian Paul R. Griffin writes, "With the support of a few clergy, Payne literally forced higher education upon his denomination. His actions were harmonious with both his divine call to be an educator and his related vision that intellectual development was the only way his largely illiterate race could learn God's laws and Christian truths and thereby become truly Christian and righteous people" (5). He held students to the highest of expectations, developing courses for teacher preparation, law, theology, and science, as well as general academics (McGinnis 48). His greatest struggle was for education of clergy, whom he deemed as "immoral" and "ungodly" preachers, many of whom had been slaves and had no formal education at all (Griffin 5). Payne recognized that the theology that made it possible to argue for the humanity and necessity of rights for African Americans also demanded forms of learning that could continue to develop this theology. He wrote that "circumstances [of the AME] have been such as to produce independent thought; this has resulted in independent actions; this independent action has resulted in the extension of our ecclesiastical organization" (Angell and Pinn xv, quoting Daniel Payne, *History of the African Methodist Church*, 1891). Independence for African Americans, he implies, can only be brought about through independence in the intellect of individual members of the community.⁶ The institutional contexts of Payne's work differ

6 For greater context of the Methodist theological underpinnings of Payne's work, see Griffin, *Black Theology as the Foundation of Three Methodist Colleges*.



markedly from Coppin's and certainly from Richard Allen's, and there is not space here to further examine Payne. But he, like Allen and Coppin, felt the call to teach, and worked to create institutions that worked for their community, both in the everyday orientation in its classrooms, and in the community mission it set out for its graduates. Allen's legacy represents a vision of literacy and community partnership that refuses to impoverish one form of knowledge for another.

Community Literacy: The View from the Present

Allen's legacy to the HBCU was to live his life as the voice of his community, speaking to and for his community's needs and ways of knowing. His vision for a material improvement in the daily life of his people was grounded in an epistemology that recognizes the central role of language in crafting understanding and change. This vision is profoundly pedagogical, and anticipates the pedagogies of high expectations in literacy and material community uplift that we can recognize in beloved educators such as Fanny Jackson Coppin and Daniel A. Payne.

Allen's mastery of rhetoric is important in a study of community literacy and the HBCU because this mastery is sponsored, to use Brandt's term, by the community itself. The significance of this sponsorship becomes clear if we consider in contrast the historically vexed relationship between white academia and the community. In this pairing, to have mastery over language is to be separate from the community; the professor is distanced from people by virtue of his knowledge and agility with language (I use the male pronoun intentionally). The metaphor of mastery, of course, cannot be removed from its literal denotation; to attempt any kind of work or service in the community, while set apart as master of anything, is to associate that service with colonization and control. These metaphoric extremes lurk behind the best intentions to engage students. As Flower puts it, "[c]ommunity outreach brings idealism and social consciousness into the academy. But it can also plunge teachers and students into its



own set of contradictory and sometimes profoundly conflicted social and literate practices” (153). What the community knows is that the professor possesses no ability with the language of the community, and because of that lack, is effectively shut out. In a traditional conception of the privileged and the unprivileged, then, the community acts as an anti-sponsor of the academic’s involvement. The community does so as a means of self-preservation. Allen’s literacy, in contrast, is made possible because of his community’s own investment in his literacy. In turn, he can use that literacy to call his community to greater purposes and nobler actions.

Flower reaches a sophisticated understanding of community as a result of her involvement with Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center, an entity invented by the community and Carnegie Mellon University. She describes how the center was, even before its inception, a part of three distinct communities: the urban neighborhood, the network of institutions and organizations of which it was a part, and third, the city of Pittsburgh and its surrounding region. All of these communities “are not physical but *symbolic* entities, constructed for a complex mix of reasons around affinities rather than visible borders” (10). The fourth community, of the community literacy collective, is also

a symbolic construction...drawn together by the practice of community literacy. The chief function of this imagined collective is to create a distinctive kind of rhetorical community –an intercultural, problem-focused, local public sphere designed for talking with others across difference. (10)

Flower’s notion of a “symbolic construction...drawn together by the practice of community literacy” fairly describes the vision of community articulated by Richard Allen, and later taken up by educators such as Fanny Jackson Coppin and Daniel A. Payne. Flowers helps us see that material practices rooted in acts of literacy create a community on an abstract plane rather than a physical one. The specifically academic,



institutionalized university itself slips almost entirely into the background in Flower's formulation; her primary image—if we might compare it to the image of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen standing up and walking out in the middle of Sunday worship—is a van full of middle class college students, hesitantly watching the sights go by in an urban neighborhood (11). The university now is not a large campus of libraries, classrooms, and residence halls, but a van making its way through the unfamiliar. Thus, the rhetorical position of the university representative, by virtue of this de-institutionalizing from campus to van, can be de-mastered, and made available to inquiry and dialogue. In short, Flower articulates for the mainstream, contemporary university a community partnership that parallels the community literacies that sponsored the work of Allen, Coppin, and even Payne. Flower writes that “local publics offer university partners a distinctive space for engagement in which we, too, can act as rhetors—not as the experts with answers but as orchestrators and documenters of a more just, generative, and transformative public dialogue” (6). Flower recognizes that the community makes the university possible, rather than the other way around.

The rhetorical moves made by Allen, Coppin, and Payne were sponsored by their communities. These three were also “orchestrators” of “transformative public dialogue.” Their acts of speaking and institution building did not need to break away from the material boundaries of the university campus; instead, they pointed towards the promise of the HBCU as an institution that could nourish and improve the community. We can embrace Allen's legacy in contemporary efforts to bring together the community and higher education. His work, and that of his successors, offers a way to restart community partnerships that emerge directly from the needs of the community. Like Allen himself, what we in higher education can offer is the spirit of inquiry, rather than the language of the oppressor.



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