



Introduction

Rewriting a Master Narrative: HBCUs and Community Literacy Partnerships

Reva E. Sias, Syracuse University
and Beverly J. Moss, The Ohio State University

For several decades now, the scholarship of rhetoric and composition studies has shown an increased interest in community literacy and community-based pedagogy. Many point to the emergence of the Ethnography of Literacy (see studies by Heath, Barton, Cushman) and New Literacy Studies (Gee, Street, among others) as an origin for this initial focus on community literacy practices. These areas of scholarship turn our gazes to community literacy practices as rich sites of inquiry that emphasize the social nature of literacy and writing. Linda Flower explains that this turn is, due in part, because “rhetoric and composition studies has long held itself accountable to the public and social significance of writing,” while recognizing its “potentially contradictory goal of developing personally empowered writers” (*Community Literacy* 76). To that end, scholars and instructors of writing, who champion community engagement and community-university collaborations, have attempted to illuminate the importance and complimentary nature of students’ writing practices and community-based partnerships (see studies by Deans, Adler-Kassner, Rose, Herzberg, Himley, and others). Most recently, rhetoric and composition scholarship, particularly service-learning and community literacy scholarship, demonstrates that community literacy and community-based pedagogy contribute to



practitioners' and scholars' understanding of the relationship between literacy, power, agency, and social justice. As theorists analyze the impact of higher education's "Gown/Town" divide on multiple stakeholders and Composition's "Public Turn," this increased focus on community literacy and community-based writing pedagogy from academic perspectives raises questions about institutional responsibility and community-university relationships. What should the role of the university be in promoting community literacy? How can or should universities partner with neighboring marginalized communities to effect social change? How can literacy partnerships promote social activism?

Understandably, the field's attempt to strike a balance between social dynamics, political agency, communal responsibility, literacy practices, and service is never simple; yet, these discussions signal an isolated, disjointed, and even hierarchical relationship of some colleges and universities to its surrounding communities. Instructors and scholars continue to question: To what end *should* and/or how *might* current pedagogical endeavors demonstrate a "public turn" in relation to institutional missions, academic expectations, service, research, and literacy practices? As Paula Mathieu explains, "This *public turn* in composition studies more generally asks teachers to connect the writing that students and they themselves do with 'real world' texts, events, or exigencies" (*Tactic of Hope* 1). The field's attention to "real world" issues moves the writing classroom closer to those communities and people outside of the college and university campuses, and we applaud these efforts.

While many scholars believe that rhetoric and composition's attention to community-based pedagogy is reminiscent of the theories of John Dewey and his call for experiential learning, we, the editors of this special issue of *Reflections*, want to bring to bear other discourses, texts, and exigencies beyond Deweyan principles. These other discourses, texts, and exigencies reveal the close, even "seamless" historical, political, and cultural relationship of African American literacy practices



and African American community partnerships. For this, we look to our Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as overlooked sites in scholarship on service-learning and university-community literacy partnerships in rhetoric and composition studies.

Though John Dewey contributes little to our understanding of cultural differences, ethnicity, power, or racial uplift, we acknowledge that his writings add to our discussions of service-learning, community engagement, and educational theory. We also acknowledge the valuable scholarship of theorists like Eli Goldblatt, Paula Mathieu, Linda Flower, and others, whose research and community partnerships engage problem-solving in African American and other marginalized communities. Their work connects colleges and universities to local communities through writing practices. We also appreciate the ongoing literacy efforts at institutions of higher learning like Temple University, Syracuse University, Carnegie Mellon University, and others, as an attempt to narrow the Gown/Town divide. Yet, it is ironic that in this “public turn” where many predominantly white colleges and universities look to African American sites for the community side of potential university-community partnerships, we find a noticeable absence of scholarship that considers pedagogical collaborations between those schools—Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—and the African American communities to which HBCUs have long devoted themselves.

In the same ways that Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams in “History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies” point to the absence of African American educational spaces in the master narrative of the history of composition, and Keith Gilyard’s “African American Contributions to Composition” reflects on the omissions of African Americans in composition studies, we point to the absence of a black presence in the role of university partners in community partnership narratives in service-learning and community literacy scholarship. We find this absence ironic given the



mission of black colleges and universities, which is to educate and serve African American communities. It is this absence that this special issue of *Reflections* addresses.

HBCUs, Then and Now

For more than 170 years, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have stood prominently in African American communities and culture as beacons of hope, racial uplift, cultural agency, power, and social justice. Williams and Ashley (2007) explain,

Education is the dividing line and the road to empowerment in black Americans—period. Quakers and other Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have done great work to help higher education for black Americans, but black colleges have always been the heart of all efforts to pull black people out of a miserable history of slavery and into the light of learning. (xvi).

Prior to the Civil War, five institutions of higher learning stood at the threshold of social change for black people. Although they experienced many name changes over the years, we acknowledge Cheyney University (1837), Avery College (1849), the Miner Institute (1852), Lincoln University (1854) and Wilberforce University (1856) as our first HBCUs and the beginning of African American community literacy practices and school partnerships.

The impetus for African American literacy practices and community-based partnerships, whether from a historical or contemporary perspective, is anchored to an ever-present call to duty, service, and uplift of black people and the world. Even from our earliest discussions of organized black literacy practices and uplift at the end of the eighteenth century, and the establishment of the first HBCU in 1837, to the public and private HBCUs currently operating in the United States and the Virgin Islands, students were and are encouraged to see themselves as



scholars and ambassadors of the black community and the world who have the ability to go out, “reach-back,” and exact social and political change through their active social engagement, rhetorical presence, and literacy practices. With this in mind, HBCUs as sites of African American literacy and African American community partners signal a critical awareness in writing and communal spaces that contribute to our understanding of community engagement and social uplift.

As Williams and Ashley (2007) note, “HBCUs are the heart of black political thinking, art and culture, and the nurture of a black intelligentsia” (xvi). From their very beginnings, it was the mission of the HBCU to counter hegemonic laws, discourses, and actions that supported America’s Black Caste system. Despite the many legal reversals, laws of exclusion, Black Codes, slavery, failures of Reconstruction, *Jim* and *Jane Crow*, segregation, and other disenfranchisements that perpetuated the American Black Caste system, people of color persevered, regardless of their origins of birth and *free* or *enslaved* legal designations. Not only did African Americans look to HBCUs as welcoming sites that would help their communities redefine themselves within a country that sought to define them as less than, but other marginalized people also looked to HBCUs as sites of racial uplift and empowerment.

For example, on April 18, 1878, seventy Native Americans, who “had been imprisoned at the close of the Red River War” at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, and who were “no longer considered dangerous,” enrolled as students at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. “These seventy men and women became the first American Indian students at Hampton and began a Native American education program that spanned more than 40 years, with the last student graduating in 1923” (“Native American Arrive”). As such, public and private HBCUs were the main sites of higher learning available to people of color when all other doors of education were closed. In addition, HBCUs ushered in the Great Black Awakening and were the primary training ground for black leaders, teachers, and preachers.



On the one hand, the mission of HBCUs was and is to nurture the minds and encourage the motivations of its students to be positive members of the African American community and the world; on the other hand, the students and graduates of HBCUs were and are expected to reach beyond the college campus into their communities, carrying educational and social transformations to an oppressed and silenced people. W. E. B. Du Bois reminds us, when writing about the Negro university,

The university must become not simply a center of knowledge but a center of applied knowledge and guide of action. And this is all the more necessary now since we easily see that planned action especially in economic life, is going to be the watchword of civilization. If the college does not root itself in the group life and afterward apply its knowledge and culture to actual living, other social organs must replace the college in this function. ("The Negro College" 72)

Using the vernacular of the day, Du Bois called for self-determination and community uplift facilitated by the Negro colleges and universities for the education of black leaders, linking Negro colleges and universities to African American knowledge, socio-economic struggle, survival, and culture. According to Du Bois, "It is an insistent, deep-throated cry for rescue, guidance, and organized advance that greets the black leaders today, and the college that trains him has got to let him know at least as much about the great black miners' strike in Alabama as about the age of Pericles" (72-73). Not only does Du Bois call for HBCUs to take their rightful place as leaders and partners to the African American community, but he also provides us with a theoretical frame for HBCUs and African American community partnerships based on agency, power, civic engagement, and racial uplift. Speaking as a graduate of a HBCU (Fisk University) and a black community leader, Du Bois calls for accountability and active engagement from black people and HBCUs, which are culturally, socially, and politically linked. Still there are other moments in the African American tradition that give testimony to



HBCUs' commitment to community-based partnerships and educational practices.

Alongside black churches and lodges, HBCUs' sense of duty and pedagogical efforts contributed to the cultural resolve and socio-economic uplift of the African American community. Throughout the annals of African American culture and history, HBCUs and African American community partnerships were the norm, not the exception; and we look to those examples of HBCU and African American community partnerships today. As the history of Tuskegee University shows, "While [it was] not the first of the historically Black colleges and universities to be established, the Negro Normal School in Tuskegee, Alabama, became one of the first, if not the first, institutions of higher learning to develop and promote those concepts revered today as community service and service-learning in a dignified manner" (Blake, "Final Word" 242). In 1904, under the leadership of George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee instructors and students used their communal membership and their knowledge of the latest agricultural research and scientific methods to assist and educate black farmers. "These were perhaps the earliest recorded instances of service-learning, community service, and community-based research in higher education. This helped define agriculture as a realistic and viable career option for former slaves and their progeny" (Blake 243). When recognizing the permeable walls between HBCUs and the African American community, there is no denying that community engagement and reciprocal collaborations between the HBCUs and African American community partners models the enthusiasm of community literacy practices today. But this black presence is virtually invisible in rhetoric and composition studies scholarship.

Therefore, we push back any notion that Historically Black Colleges and Universities have outlived their usefulness. Yes, it is true that the African American community and its community partners have achieved several legal victories in the United States, such as the end of Black



Codes, *Jim* and *Jane Crow*, segregation, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, we look at these long fought Civil Rights battles as legal redresses brought about by the need for social justice, courage, and self-determination of black leadership and activism which was borne out in African American community collaborations with HBCUs, schools, black churches, black fraternities and sororities, and other African American partnerships. Further, we look to the most important evidence of the usefulness of HBCUs—its graduates. We could drop names of famous HBCU alums, like Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Martin Luther King, Jr., Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, Nikki Giovanni, Oprah Winfrey, Jessie Jackson, Spike Lee, Ed Bradley, Medgar Evers, L. Douglas Wilder, and others, who exemplify the service and mission of black colleges and universities. But we believe that facts speak for themselves. According to the *Hearing on Responding to the Needs of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the 21st Century*, “while comprising only 3 percent of the nation’s two- and four-year institutions, HBCUs are responsible for producing 28 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 15 percent of all master’s degrees and 17 percent of all first professional degrees earned by African-Americans” (34). This fact is significant and shows not only the important presence that HBCUs hold in the black community but reveals an invaluable system of higher education in the United States.

As members of the rhetoric and composition community and, more importantly, as a graduate of a HBCU (Beverly) and as one who benefited from a first-year experience at a HBCU (Reva), we call for more scholarly focus on HBCUs as sites for African American literacy practices and community partnerships. Just as Royster and Williams and Gilyard suggested in 1999, the invisibility of HBCUs in the master narratives of rhetoric and composition is deafening. Over a decade after these scholars point to this absence, we still call for this gap to be filled. With this in mind, this issue of *Reflections* highlights the long-standing



missions, literacy practices, and problem-solving efforts maintained by HBCUs and their African American community literacy partners. The contributions, five articles and two interviews, to this special issue of *Reflections* on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Community Literacy Partnerships explore this topic from a variety of methodological perspectives; yet, they emphasize the long-standing mission of HBCUs to serve their communities and to promote social action within, across, and beyond university-community boundaries.

Elizabeth Kimball, in her article “Richard Allen and the Prehistory of Engaged Community Learning at HBCUs,” argues that although he predated the first HBCU, we can look to Reverend Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church, for a model for “integrating community literacy and higher learning.” Using historiography as a method, Kimball examines Allen’s rhetorical pedagogies and his influences on other educators and preachers (Fanny Jackson Coppin and Bishop Daniel A. Payne, for example) to persuade readers that Allen’s visions of community and literacy are taken up by early black leaders of HBCUs. Kimball suggests that Allen’s “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.” Richard Allen, as Kimball argues, plants the seed of the university-community partnership that blossoms and grows into the firm roots of HBCUs’ relationships with their neighboring communities that continue to flourish to this day.

The next three articles turn our attention to how this seed blossomed at specific HBCUs through a close examination of curricular and extracurricular examples of how HBCUs enacted school-community partnerships. First, Zandra Jordan in “‘Found’ Literacy Partnerships: Service and Activism at Spelman College” examines how Spelman College students engage in community literacy projects as part of their quest to “change the world.” Jordan characterizes “found” literacy as “collaborations around literacy practices that emerge unexpectedly when



Spelman College students enact the spirit of service and activism.” In this article, Jordan explores how Spelman promotes this spirit of service and activism through its curricular commitment to community literacy partnerships in its First-Year Experience Seminar. We see how their work in the community provides an opportunity for these Spelman women to begin to see themselves as social activists.

The second of these articles to examine a specific HBCU-community literacy partnership is Shirley Faulkner-Springfield’s look at a cross-age literacy exchange between college and high school students. In “Letters to Young High School Students: Writing and Uniting an Academic Community,” Faulkner-Springfield provides a detailed description and analysis of how a class of first-year African American students in a North Carolina Central University (NCCU) composition class participate in a letter-writing exchange with a group of students from an area high school. While Faulkner-Springfield explores the value of this community-literacy partnership for both high school and college students, she provides a rhetorical analysis of the college students’ letters, which are generated in response to the high schools students’ concerns. Within this analysis, Faulkner-Springfield points to how both groups of students use the letter-writing to negotiate their changing identities as students and to forge relationships, through this literacy event, across university-community boundaries.

The next article places Jackson State University (JSU) in the spotlight. JSU, like Spelman College and most other HBCUs, points to its history of serving the African American community as a point of pride and as a fundamental part of its mission. One of the central ways that JSU accomplishes this mission in the twenty-first century is through service-learning literacy projects. In their article “African American Students Learn by Serving the African American Community: A Jackson State University Example of ‘Challenging Minds and Changing Lives,’” Preselfannie Whitfield McDaniels and her JSU colleagues introduce readers to literacy collaborations between JSU college students and



neighborhood elementary schools in one instance, and between JSU college students and community organizations which support African American women, in another. These partnerships, tied to two courses—“First-Year Composition and Literature: Serving Area Elementary Schools” and “Second-Year Humanities Course: Serving Women in the Community,” demonstrate the broad range of community that JSU students negotiate in these courses and partnerships. Using language remarkably similar to that used at Spelman and other HBCUs, these authors point out that these literacy partnerships “continue the mission to impact communities” and to graduate students “who are capable and equipped to actually improve community conditions and, in effect, change the world.”

The fifth article in this issue, Kendra Fullwood’s “*Pro Christo et Humanitate: Making Lives through Community Literacy and Partnerships at Shaw University*,” takes a historical approach to examining how Shaw University established a school-community literacy partnership with African American communities beyond the immediate geographical community boundaries in which Shaw is located. In this article, Fullwood pushes the boundaries of school-community literacy partnerships by focusing on how Shaw, as a primary trainer of African American teachers and preachers, educated a significant number of African Americans. By providing examples of how Shaw-trained teachers and preachers became literacy leaders in their communities through their roles in community schools, colleges, and churches, Fullwood illustrates Shaw’s influence on the literate lives of African Americans who have never stepped foot on the campus. Thus, Fullwood pushes readers to see “community” on a much larger scale than is normally expected in discussions of community literacy practices.

While four of the five articles discussed above focus primarily on the university stakeholders in the school-community partnership, community partners’ voices must not be overlooked. To that end, the next two interview essays introduce readers to community partners



who have established unique relationships with HBCUs. “‘Upholding the Tradition’: Connecting Community with Literacy and Service-learning at Claflin University,” includes two mini-interviews featuring a community partner and a university partner involved in Claflin’s *The Big Read* program, a National Endowment for the Arts-sponsored literacy program. Corrie Claiborne and Stephany Rose, former Claflin professors, interview Reverend Larry McCutcheon about his church’s participation in the Claflin-sponsored literacy partnership on Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*. In this interview, Reverend McCutcheon talks about his church’s involvement with the community reading of Gaines’ novel and about Claflin’s role in the community. In an interesting twist, Claiborne then interviews her collaborator Stephany Rose about her views on the specific events of Claflin’s *A Lesson Before Dying* community literacy program and about the role of Claflin in the African American community in Orangeburg County. The pairing of these two interviews from the different stakeholders provides insight into how the university and the community expectations meet.

Finally, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) professor Veronica Yon interviews Van Wilson about his father, Roosevelt Wilson, who was the former owner and editor of the *Capital Outlook*, Tallahassee’s African American newspaper and a former FAMU journalism professor. In this interview, Van Wilson explains the close relationship between the newspaper and FAMU, a relationship that began before Roosevelt Wilson bought the paper. While this interview is not focused on a literacy partnership sponsored by the University, it does focus on community literacy sponsors, Roosevelt Wilson and the *Capital Outlook*, who have strong ties to both FAMU and the Tallahassee African American community.

While these articles and interviews offer only a hint of the depth, breadth and wealth of HBCU-community literacy partnerships, we see them as making a significant contribution to rewriting the master narratives that have, in the past, left HBCUs out of the story. In that sense, this special



issue, as Royster and Williams call for, writes in some of the spaces left and, in doing so, brings attention to the long history of service-learning and community-based literacy partnerships rooted in Historically Black Colleges and Universities.



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