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Editor's Introduction: The Community Classroom and African American Contributions to Community Literacy: Moving Forward while Looking Back

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African American community literacy (AACL) originates with the belief that collective social interactions frequently provide the best chance for individuals to develop—through dialogue, personal interactions, and storytelling—into critical citizens. Community, although often taken for granted, figures into the learning of all students as a primary influence on their language and reading habits, and as a space for deliberating with others. In response to this understanding, the editors and authors of this collection ask how we might use the long tradition of African American community literacy to teach students to write and respond to traditional academic concerns and the broader social world. Our interests in AACL extends from an understanding that “if writing instructors are to open their typically controlled, teacher-centered classrooms to the press of local community life, they should be aware of how literacy is figured differently across various contexts” (Deans, Roswell, and Burr 5). In this case, we focus on the way black Americans have used specific social practices to organize and educate one another.

As Moss and Sias astutely acknowledge in the previous issue of this journal, the “increased interest in community literacy and community-based pedagogy” reveals a broader balancing act within composition studies to reconsider the “hierarchal relationship of some colleges and universities to its surrounding communities” (2). In reconsidering this



relationship, it becomes important to pay attention to the way people deploy literacy in communal settings to resist, negotiate, transform, and make sense of the power relations they experience. This special issue is driven by three intriguing questions related to the recent “public turn” in composition studies: How have black communities developed and deployed a variety of social practices to educate and organize their youth? How do they deploy these practices currently? And what is the value of these practices for contemporary composition curricula?

Our goal is to explore how and when black American communities have used reading, writing, and oral performance to resolve complex problems outside of formal academic classrooms. For us, the book clubs, literary societies, public forums, newspapers, community organizations, church groups and other social spaces black Americans use to resist and circumvent the racism and violence forced upon them represents a “community classroom,” a space where students and teachers understand that “the entire social world serves as a classroom in which particular beliefs, values, identities, and stories are sanctioned” (Hill 110). Ideally such a classroom works in conjunction with but not in service of formal schooling. It develops activities, programs, and ways of teaching that foster student abilities and allow them to receive dual degrees in both sidewalk universities and traditional universities (Gilyard 110). Following the work of Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner in *African American Literacies Unleashed* and Maisha Fisher in *Black Literate Lives* who argue for closer attention to black community institutions and organizations that model ways of integrating cultural ethics into our teaching, our collection examines a wide variety of sites, organizations, and social practices that also serve as models for culturally relevant community-based curriculum.

While Ball and Lardner and Fisher represent relatively recent paragons for our research in African American community literacy, we do not want to overlook scholars such as Geneva Smitherman (*Talkin and Testifyin*, 1977; *Talkin that Talk*, 1999; *Word from the Mother*, 2006), Keith



Gliyard (*Voices of the Self*, 1991; *Let's Flip the Script*, 1996; *Composition and Cornel West*, 2008), Karla Holloway (*Codes of Conduct*, 1996), Elizabeth McHenry (*Forgotten Readers*, 2002), Robin D.G. Kelley (*Yo mama's disfunckional*, 1997), Jabari Mahiri (*Shooting for Excellence*, 1998), Elaine Richardson (*African American Literacies*, 2002), Adam Banks (*Digital Griots*, 2011), Beverly Moss (*A Community Text Arises*, 2003), and Vorris Nunley (*Keeping It Hushed*, 2011), to name only a few, who have adroitly articulated black public culture's relationship to teaching and critical literacy. Collectively, their work spans the entire African American tradition and highlights the twin goals of AACL, to both educate and effect change. It is in this tradition that we try to keep the conversation moving forward.

African American Community Classrooms Then and Now

AACL has evolved out of multiple social practices such as pamphleteering, literary social clubs, and black owned newspapers that produce and maintain a collective consciousness dedicated to social change and personal success. Prohibited from formal sites of education and constantly abused and punished by legal and sometimes illegal social codes, slaves often banded together to educate and aid one another in learning to read and write as a way of accessing an American public sphere. The distribution and public readings of David Walker's "*Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*," a political manifesto directed to black citizens of the nineteenth century, serves as a significant example of this practice. An avid reader, contributor, and distributor of the black American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, Walker was well aware of the value of literacy to the black community and its potential for galvanizing, even among a largely illiterate population of blacks (McHenry 34).



Elizabeth McHenry articulates the significance of this practice in her study of African American literary societies in *Forgotten Readers*. She explains that the circulation of black publications such as Walker's *Appeal*, as well as the news journals *Freedom's Journal*, *the Colored American*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, *the Weekly Anglo-African*, and *the Anglo-African Magazine*, forged "imagined communities," similar to Benedict Anderson's "imagined political community," by maintaining connections across great distances through the sovereign space of the page. These documents offered black readers, and illiterate listeners of these readers¹, freedom "from the control of whites" and a sense of autonomy that would influence their collective social and political decisions (87). Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* records this tradition of community literacy by tracing his own literate development and journey towards freedom. In *Narrative of the Life*, Douglass recounts his experiences as Mr. Freeland's slave and his first attempts at escaping slavery. During his time on Freeland's plantation Douglass taught fellow slaves to read and write during secret meetings at the home of a free colored person (75). As Douglass describes, he "succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read" (74). But perhaps more than that he encouraged them to discuss and reflect on the Bible and its relevance to their current living conditions. Out of these discussions a few, including Douglass, decided to take action and devise a plan to escape. They came to see the value not merely in reading ideas but in the conversations that would serve as a basis for their political positions on slavery and decisions to emancipate themselves.

While this Douglass example does not resemble the book clubs, voting groups, and black owned newspapers that would come to more firmly define African American community literacy as a tradition, it does highlight the foundation of AACL and the cultural belief in education as a communal and dialogic process.



Black directed newspapers would make dialogue and collective decision-making a consistent staple in AACL. Periodicals such as the *Freedom's Journal*, *Fredrick Douglass's Paper* and later the *Blacknews* newspaper provided a forum for blacks to share “their voices and ideas” with other black Americans (Fisher 62). As many black Americans came to understand in the early nineteenth century, the printed word was a source of African American rhetoric that both challenged white authority and highlighted the hypocrisy of white injustice against black Americans. Although the *Freedom's Journal* would be a short-lived publication, it would significantly change how black Americans understood black newspapers and other independent black institutions. Through conversations about the state of the black community, voting, and local and national politics black print-news would become a central form of literacy training and a primary institution within the black public sphere.

In addition to print-news and literary societies, cultural music performances and community-based organizations would come to shape the AACL throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Jelly Roll Morton, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, KRS-ONE, Public Enemy, and others have circulated, through music, critical and political views about the black community that continue to shape the actions of black public culture. Songs such as “Strange Fruit,” “What’s Going On,” and “Fight the Power” represent collective calls for social change and would serve as primary texts for reading the world through a black Americans cultural lens. Recent scholarship such as Mark Anthony Neal’s *What the Music Said*, provides a more in-depth account of this legacy.

It is clear to anyone following the continual and pervasive influence of black popular music today that it remains a profound source of social commentary and literacy training among the national black public. As McHenry explains, “recent scholarship on contemporary cultural productions such as rap and hip hop demonstrates the same incentive to portray the extent to which members of the black working class,



although seemingly powerless and outside official structures of power, have nevertheless devised ways to participate in the political struggles that surround them, to challenge their oppression, and to express their subjectivity” (16). Thus, it’s imperative that in looking forward to how AACL is enacted today and it’s potential for shaping public and academic classrooms that scholars begin to think creatively about how music has functioned as community literacy.

Similarly, community-based organizations deserve more attention for the type of pedagogical training they provide. Ball and Lardner argue that writing teachers should learn to shift pedagogical focus from the conventions of written products to the interactive discourse that circulates the classroom. For them community-based organizations model the type of organic, optimistic, and flexible practices that allow for confident, culturally informed, and engaging forms of communication (73). In community-based organizations, students are expected to perform several roles and, thus, must learn to adapt themselves—linguistically, socially, and culturally—to particular situations. It is this process of negotiation that is particularly valuable as the term negotiation suggests students are not made to feel ashamed of their cultural resources but are instead encouraged to reflect on their “moment-to-moment” exchanges and to decide for themselves the value of their community knowledge and composition choices.

Also important to remember is that such programs do not merely indicate possibilities for easing the transition of urban “at-risk” African American students into University classrooms, but also model ways for University and public school educators to rethink their own classroom practices, incorporating group activities that promote student interactions that require a multitude of responses and social roles. We believe this collection highlights the tradition of AACL and pushes academic thinking forward as well as encourages academic discussions of community/ university partnerships and curricula developed to support community writing.



Our Contribution to Community Literacy

The articles in this collection represent proposals, tactics, and voices derived from interactions with distinctive and deliberative black communities. They explore the possibilities for community and university partnerships by reflecting on the way writing and reading occurs within specific communities and evolves out of the aforementioned traditions. They represent recent examples of scholars, teachers, and concerned citizens attempting to stretch in some cases and reconstruct in others how scholars and administrators think about community partnerships.

For this collection we solicited contributors from a variety of institutions and communities. The contributors represent former college level faculty now working for their respective communities, high school teachers invested in the welfare of their students and neighborhoods, faculty at two-year and four-year collegiate institutions interested in language, literacy, and community engagement, as well as community activists practicing the very community outreach we scholars often theorize and analyze for the benefit of our intellectual community and respective university's profile. We purposely sought a wide-range of scholarship and subjects connected to the type of community work we value. While our goal was not be exhaustive, or rigidly narrow in our discussion of contemporary African American contributions to community literacy, we did want to shine a light on what we saw as transformative definitions of community literacy.

In "Daughters Making Sense of African American Literature in Out-of-School Zones," Melvette Melvin Davis explores the value of contemporary book clubs for African American youth. Using a mixture of recorded dialogue and close textual analysis she highlights the intellectual processes and voices of African American young adult females, a group often silenced or forgotten in community literacy research. As Davis illustrates, the texts the young women discuss provides cogent subject matter for encouraging reflective analysis of



one's community. Davis knows well the value of stimulating confidence building conversations about one's culture being a black female from Maryland's Prince George's County. The book clubs that facilitate these conversations are a valuable forums for literate development, and as she concludes, that serve as paradigms for improving youth education by speaking with youth rather than at them.

Yaa Williams-Christopher's "The Relevance of Homeplace Narratives" in the Academy extends Melvin-Davis's perspective on young adult African American literature as a communal resource by urging academic scholars to take seriously the communal and cultural function of recent African American women's memoirs. For Williams-Christopher this means academics and others should turn to these autobiographical texts not merely as literature to be surveyed and studied within academic classrooms, but as informative narratives useful for understanding and engaging specifics sects of society. Texts such as Cupcake Brown's autobiography *A Piece of Cake* should be integrated into formal curriculums as educative intellectual testimony to the experiences of working class, abused, and/ or impoverished youth. Such texts also provide ethnographic insight into what programs universities might develop to build community-empowering, rather than academic dominating partnerships with their local communities. Much like the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, African American women's memoirs disseminate important truths that students bring with them from their surrounding communities.

Included in the collection are interviews with figures working within and for their respective communities. Following Williams-Christopher's article is an interview with Wilma Stephenson. Stephenson has achieved some critical acclaim from the 2007 documentary *Pressure Cooker*. She is known primarily for her feisty demeanor and ability to scold, threaten, care for, and validate her students' identities. We chose to interview Mrs. Stephenson because her mother-wit and proactive teaching style illustrates an interesting model for the idea of a community classroom. She



performs what many of the articles collected here describe by connecting the values of her classroom to the social world. She grounds her teaching in a black American tradition that situates cooking, a performance-based activity, as a way of reading and negotiating the world. As she notes in the interview, the kitchen is a place where people learn about each other through conversations that extend well beyond chopping, boiling, and sautéing food items. The kitchen literally and figuratively serves as a “homeplace,” a classroom space for learning and building community and nurturing individual and collective identities.

In “A Prison Classroom, African American Literature, and the Pedagogy of Freedom” Patrick Alexander describes a course in African American literature that he teaches at a local North Carolina prison. Given that disproportionate amounts of African American males remain incarcerated in prisons and that in order to transcend their physical imprisonment many of these men use academic courses to explore personal and social issues related to their incarceration, prison classrooms seem prevalent to ideas about community classrooms. Though African American males make up a disproportionate amount of prison population, it is not the race of these inmates, Alexander insists, that places these seminars within the AACL tradition. Instead it is the conversations and open forums about the African American experience that connects them to a tradition of AACL. Much like Walker’s *Appeal*, he argues that African American texts serve as a galvanizing and critical resource for thinking through one’s own position on the politics of the social world. That many of the writers read in the course have experienced pain and disenfranchisement similar to his students only adds to the writers’ value to this community. For Alexander, the course links formal academic training and practical social application in ways that are ultimately emancipatory.

In the fourth article for this issue, Susan Cridland-Hughes provides an interesting perspective on community sponsored rhetorical education in “African American Community Literacy and Urban Debate.” Although debate has gained some attention within the African American



community due to the popularity of the Denzel Washington directed film *The Great Debaters*, black American debate programs are rarely discussed in connection with community writing. However, as Cridland-Hughes asserts, organizations such as City Debate do more than merely train black urban youth in the art of public policy debate. They serve as a space for building community. Through urban debate, minority youth are educated about cultural traditions essential to their self-confidence and social development. They are also encouraged to read and learn about artifacts essential to their personal growth and intellectual voices. They discuss, disagree, and deliberate about these artifacts in order to grow as orators and writers. Thus, Cridland-Hughes shows how AACL practices are applied to contemporary sites of rhetorical education.

Damon Cagnolatti's "Battling to be Heard," provides a unique perspective on the possibilities of hip hop music for modeling ways to connect formal academic training with community engagement and creative cultural expression. Cagnolatti describes his experiences participating in a high school reading group that read hip hop music, poetry, and excerpts from critical texts. He then connects these experiences to his own approaches to teaching freshman composition. For Cagnolatti writing is always an expression of one's view of the world and how they are engaging the ideas of others at that time. Thus, he assumes that the job of teachers in a community classroom is to position writers to engage a broad range of subject matter without ignoring the relevance of their compositions to local experiences. For Cagnolatti this means paying more attention to resources such as hip-hop music, which can be a powerful catalyst for encouraging youth to reflect and respond to their local conditions. For both Alexander and Cagnolatti, community classroom means finding ways to immerse their students in critical writing that asks intriguing questions of them without reproducing the pressure to view their work as purely academic.



Our second interview revisits Thomas Lee, the important facilitator for the communal classroom discussed in Cagnolatti's article. Lee, now employed at "Hillsides Youth Moving On," an organization for abused youth, sat down to talk about his motivations for facilitating hip hop inspired reading groups during his tenure in the Los Angeles County Public School system. He also decides to fill us in on his latest views on and experiences with a "hip hop generation" of youth. Like many educators, Lee sees hip hop as a powerful rhetoric that produces both poignant and volatile messages that can either aid or undermine community development.

In the last article, Tim Lee, a youth minister and community activist, argues that black community organizations, such as his organization *One Black Man*, remain valuable community classrooms in part because they remain separate from actual institutions of higher education. The focus of his article, "A Narrative on Teaching, Community, and Activism," is two-fold; it highlights the experiences that led Lee to form his organization and illustrates his own approach for engaging black male youth desperately in need of role-models and organizations that will challenge the stereotypes and gang culture that continue to negatively impact their growth. For Lee, the title of his organization is telling. It highlights the power that symbols can hold within a community. He is literally one black man who believes that change grows out of individual choices of when and how to intervene in the lives of others. However, as he points out, the title "One Black Man" also suggests a gendered and raced way of understanding how different populations are disproportionately affected by social policies, poverty, and crime. Such an understanding is vital to the experiment of education and how one engages a community.

That these works promote the type of attention that those interested in community literacy should begin to scrutinize is clear. They represent moments where individuals come together to challenge prevailing logic and the power dynamics attached to that logic by forging their own understanding of what it means to express themselves as citizens,



participants, and collectives. Moreover, while most of these works focus exclusively on African American sites and practices, these statements model the type of work instrumental to a more inclusive understanding of writing and community engagement.



Notes

1. As McHenry explains, the written word at this time became an efficient way of reaching out to black Americans across the nation. However, because many were illiterate, David Walker pressed literate black Americans to read texts aloud to those within the community (36). This would become common practice as oral public readings encouraged community consensus and led to a collective political consciousness.

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