

**MERGING PAST AND PRESENT: HISTORICAL AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING  
PEDAGOGY IN THE CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS  
CLASSROOM**

by

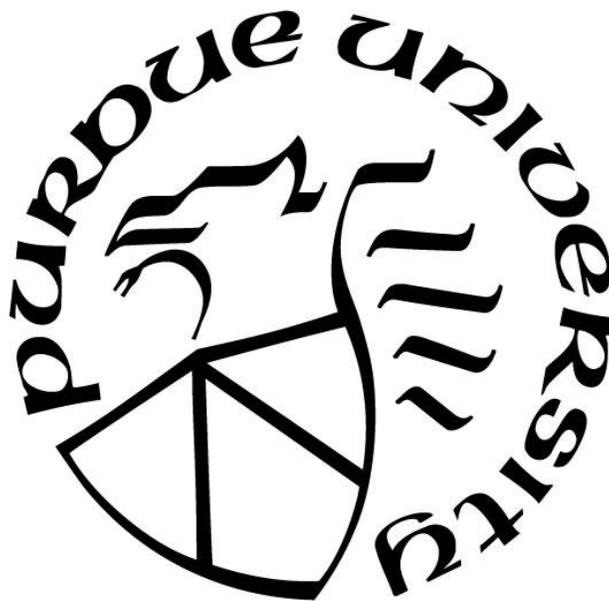
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**A Thesis**

*Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University*

*In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of*

**Master of Science in Education**



Department of Curriculum & Instruction

West Lafayette, Indiana

May 2019

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I am incredibly grateful for Dr. Tara Star Johnson and her commitment to this thesis. From the start, her guidance and support have been invaluable. I am indebted to her for the precision and care she took when editing my work. Her investment in both this topic and my writing was essential to making this thesis all it could be.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	5
INTRODUCTION .....	6
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY .....	16
Background .....	16
Teacher Attitudes and Philosophies .....	21
Cultural Communication .....	23
Pluralistic Curriculum Content.....	27
Culturally Aligned Instruction.....	31
Conclusion (and Looking Forward) .....	37
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY SOCIETIES OF THE 1800S.....	39
Introduction .....	39
Education in the Black Heritage.....	42
Education for Individual and Community Development .....	47
Identity Construction .....	47
Literacy as a Collective Endeavor .....	49
Peer Evaluation .....	51
Education for Black Social and Political Advancement .....	52
Articulating a Voice.....	54
Democracy and Citizenship .....	55
LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE.....	57
Introduction .....	57
Literary Magazines.....	59
<i>The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races</i> .....	60
<i>Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life</i> .....	64
Anthologies .....	68
<i>The Book of American Negro Poetry</i> .....	69
<i>The New Negro: An Interpretation</i> .....	71
<i>Readings from Negro Authors</i> .....	72
CONCLUSION.....	75
REFERENCES .....	84

## ABSTRACT

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Institution: Purdue University

Degree Received: May 2019

Title: Merging Past and Present: Historical African American Literacy Development and  
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in the Contemporary English Language Arts Classroom

Committee Chair: Tara Star Johnson

For African Americans, literacy has historically been rooted in passion, collaboration, and social justice. This study explores two distinct sites of historical African American literacy development: literary societies of the 1800s and print culture of the Harlem Renaissance. Notably, literacy and culture were fundamentally intertwined during these times, creating an urgency and inspiration for literary pursuits not often seen today. In an effort to rekindle this reverence and utility for literacy in classrooms today, a culturally sustaining pedagogy is called for. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to leverage students' cultural knowledge and skills. By culturally aligning curriculum and instruction, educators position students to experience the transformative power of literacy—a transformative power that was evident in African American literary societies and through the Harlem Renaissance print culture. This study seeks to merge historical and contemporary approaches to literacy development to reconceptualize literacy education and engagement for all students.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1926, African American<sup>1</sup> intellectual and activist W.E.B. DuBois took the stage in Chicago, Illinois, at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In speaking about the potential political power bound up within the African American community and the means through which to exercise it, DuBois (1926) declared all art to be propaganda. For DuBois, being an artist meant being a political agent. The catalyst for this political action was the paper and pen, as poetry, essays, and fiction served to enlighten and broaden the minds, and bolster the spirits, of African Americans. DuBois believed that disseminating works written by himself and other African American writers would stir racial pride and set in motion a movement for social justice. The speech DuBois delivered at the NAACP Annual Conference would eventually make its way to the pages of *Crisis* magazine.

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<sup>1</sup> My somewhat naïve intention when I began writing this paper was to exclusively use the term *African American*. As a white person, this felt most appropriate. Once I began including scholarship surrounding culturally based pedagogies and African American literary history, my paper naturally became loaded with various terms: African American, Black, black, Negro. I found myself in the somewhat awkward position of deciding which term(s) to use and why. There were two instances where this decision was easy: direct quotations and my own academic voice. When directly quoting, I obviously retain the scholar's usage. When writing from my own academic voice, I employ the term *African American*. In addition to this feeling the most respectful, my work in this thesis focuses on African Americans, not the larger group of Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, etc. who are included in the black category. The gray area I found myself in the crosshairs of is when not using direct quotations, yet referencing a work that uses a term other than African American. I grappled with this scenario—should I substitute African American for the scholar's term? Or should I use the scholar's term, despite writing in my own academic voice, and go against my preference for African American? Presumably like me, while writing the scholar had a decision to make as to which term to use. I wanted to respect that scholar's usage, assuming they made a deliberate choice that they felt would carry a certain meaning. I decided to adhere to the following self-created rule, which I felt respected the work of other scholars, while also remaining in line with my personal preference toward the term *African American*. When referencing another's work, but not directly quoting it, I chose to substitute African American for whatever term the scholar uses, except in the instances where the scholar's term describes a specific cultural tradition, movement, era, or event, in which cases I retain the original term.

With *Crisis* magazine as the political mouthpiece of the NAACP, DuBois and his fellow founders worked to provide political insights and social awareness to African Americans. Featuring news, drama, poetry, and fiction, this magazine aimed to establish and nurture a tradition of African American literature. Reaching its height during the Harlem Renaissance, *Crisis* was a central pillar of literary arts for the African American community. Literacy played a vital role in many African Americans' lives, marking an important period of flourishing literacies.

During the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans began engaging deeply with texts, initiating a new African American literary legacy, and forming racial bonds that proved pivotal in the fight for social justice. Though African American literary expression exploded in the Harlem Renaissance, it was not the first instance of thriving literacy among this group. The inspiring literary production of the Harlem Renaissance in many ways had its roots in the literary ventures of African Americans in the second half of the 1800s.

In particular, African American literary societies provided fertile grounds for literacy development during this period. These sites of communal learning organically sprang up throughout northern cities. Most avenues of traditional education were blocked to even free African Americans at this time. Consequently, alternative locations of learning were established by and for African Americans seeking to expand their literacy. These societies sought to encourage engagement in scholarly pursuits and foster racial pride that could potentially lead to racial uplift. Oration, debate, reading, music, singing, recitation, conversation, critique, and prayer were all parts of an evening at a literary society. While there was a vein of entertainment and amusement that ran through these societies, this was not the enduring impact. What sprang from these lively events was an ethos of activism and citizenship. This ethos undeniably

pervaded the literary pursuits of African Americans who engaged in literary societies of the 1800s and those who contributed to the literary explosion of the Harlem Renaissance. Literacy and political activism were inextricably bound together.

As an educator, reading accounts of literary societies and Harlem Renaissance literary production was disorienting. I read about the passion and dedication to literary pursuits among this community and could not help but juxtapose these scenes with what I knew about common instructional practices and academic outcomes in today's public schools. The comparison was striking. In Table 1 Muhammad (2012) outlines the ways in which literary societies of the 1800s stand in stark contrast to the practices of many modern day English teachers:

Table 1. Muhammad, G. E. (2012). The literacy development and practices within African American literary societies. *Black History Bulletin*, 75(1), 6-13.

<b>Aspects of 1800s Literary Societies</b>	<b>Common Scenarios in Classrooms Today</b>
Literacy was defined as both cognitive reading and writing skills as well as social and cultural practices	Literacy is monolithically defined as a set of reading and writing skills
Literacy was the foundation and central to all disciplinary learning	Literacy is mostly taught in reading or language arts classrooms and not as much in the content areas
Acts of literacy such as reading and writing were developed simultaneously	Reading is often dichotomized with writing and used in separate lesson plans
Instruction was responsive to the events and people of the time	Curriculum is often prescriptive and remains unchanged for years
Enabling texts were central to all literacy development	Texts are typically selected for reading strategies or skill development which could often times remain unresponsive to students' cultural identities
Learners of different literacy abilities came together to learn from one another	Classrooms are often tracked or students are placed in ability groups
Literacy learning was highly collaborative and a shared learning space was created	The teacher is seen as the sole or primary source of knowledge
Members read a variety of text genres but reading and writing African American literature was central	Students rarely experience a great variety of African American literature in their schooling experience

Table 1 continued

Members were taught how to reclaim the power of authority in language	Students often write to teacher's standards and hardly use language in ways to understand power relationships or make sense of one's self
Identity development was cultivated alongside of literacy learning	Identity meaning making through instruction has not been a focal point of curricula

What's more, the achievement measures of African American students today reflect the relative ineffectiveness of modern pedagogical approaches to teaching English language arts to African American students, most of which are outlined in the table above. The glaring chasm between African American and white students' literacy achievement points to a fundamental problem in curriculum and instruction that culturally based literacy seeks to address. Based on data collected through the Educational Testing Service between 1971 and 2008, Barton and Coley (2010) conclude, "Most of the progress in closing the achievement gap occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, overall progress in closing the achievement gap has slowed" (p. 7). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports in The Nation's Report Card (n.d.) that in 2015, 46 percent of white 12<sup>th</sup> graders had a reading score at or above the level of proficient, while just 17 percent of African American 12<sup>th</sup> graders met or exceeded proficiency in reading. Among all races included in the 2015 assessment, on average 37 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient. Only 52 percent of African American 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2015 were found to possess at least basic reading skills, according to NAEP. Discouragingly, this number decreased from 1992 when 61 percent of African American 12<sup>th</sup> grade students met the basic level. From 1992 until 2015, no more than one percent of African American 12<sup>th</sup> grade students tested at the advanced level on the NAEP reading assessment. The disparities in achievement between African American students and their white peers continue across subject matter, as 32 percent of

white students scored proficient on the NAEP math assessment, compared to seven percent of African American students.

These statistics are not to suggest that African American students are illiterate or deficient in comparison to their peers. Although fairly easily comprehended, these statistics do not tell the whole story and commonly fail to represent variances within a group. In this case, African American students. In many instances, these students come to class possessing dynamic literacies; however, these literacies often go undervalued and underdeveloped. What's more, standardized tests in form and content narrowly measure a student's literacy reserves and capabilities. A quick glance at these achievement statistics should not inform an approach to educational reform. It is imperative to seek out the deeper issues underlying these measures and work for equity in the classroom.

While these statistics are undeniable on the surface, the roots of their existence are far more complex and multilayered. There are many reasons why over the course of the last 50 years very little progress has been made in narrowing the academic achievement discrepancies between African American and white students. The issue is tied to factors beyond just instructional strategies, educator competence, and student effort; social, economic, and political forces in schools, communities, and individual households collide to dramatically shape a student's educational attainment. Rothstein (2004) submits, "It is true that low income and skin color themselves don't influence academic achievement, but the collection of characteristics that define social class differences inevitably influence that achievement" (p. 106). Compounding African American students' socioeconomics and its impact on learning are the barriers they face within the walls of their schools.

Drawing on civil rights data obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, Groeger, Waldman, and Eads (2018) report on the rampant inequalities in opportunity for African American students. They reveal that in South Carolina, white students are 3.2 times as likely to be in advanced placement courses, compared to their African American peers. Mississippi's African American student population is 50 percent of the state's total student body, yet the percentage of African American students enrolled in advanced placement courses or gifted and talented programs is 32 and 29, respectively. Nationally, white students are 1.8 times as likely as African American students to be in advanced placement courses. There was only one state (North Dakota), out of the 43 states with available data, in which white students were less likely to be enrolled in advanced placement courses compared with African American peers. As this report suggests, the perceived academic underachievement of African American students has a multitude of intersecting and complicated variables.

Many educators, legislators, academics, educational publishers, and educational testing companies have attempted to address—or unfortunately, capitalize on—the increasingly documented and confounding achievement gap. In the landmark educational initiative of the Bush Administration, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) sought to close the achievement gap and raise student achievement by focusing on test scores, increasing educational choice, and promoting more well-trained and better qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007). These aims initially appeared positive, but once enacted, NCLB arguably fed into and even exacerbated many of the underlying issues historically contributing to the achievement gap. Darling-Hammond (2007) states that NCLB “layers onto a grossly unequal school system a set of unmeetable test score targets that disproportionately penalize schools serving the neediest students” (p. 246). She continues by declaring,

The Act's regulations have caused a number of states to abandon their thoughtful diagnostic assessment and accountability systems—replacing instructionally rich, improvement-oriented systems with more rote-oriented, punishment-driven approaches—and it has thrown many high-performing and steadily improving schools into chaos rather than helping them remain focused and deliberate in their ongoing efforts to serve students well. (p. 246)

The very students NCLB sought to help (underachieving, low socioeconomic status minority students) were the ones who were the most negatively affected. As teachers focused on students' standardized test performance, the education process itself grew increasingly standardized, ignoring the individual humanity of students.

It is understandable, then, how as a young educator coming of age in the era of high stakes accountability and standardized testing, that learning about the flourishing literary lives of African Americans within literary societies and during the Harlem Renaissance was inspiring. At the core of this population's devotion to literacy and learning was a yearning to justify, celebrate, and expand one's humanity. Throughout the 1800s and into the first part of the 1900s, African Americans were educated—mostly in informal and alternative sites of learning—within their cultural frameworks. Following desegregation and continuing into present day, African Americans were/are no longer educated within these cultural frameworks and were/are expected to assimilate to the predominantly Eurocentric instructional practices, content, and materials of public schools. As I have expounded, the results have been less than desirable, and at worst, harmful to African American students in their educational and human development.

As Ladson-Billings (1995a) asserts, "Educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture" (p. 159). It is time that

teachers honestly and humanely make literacy more holistically nourishing for African American students. Contrary to some belief, this objective “does not pit academic success and cultural affiliation against each other. Rather, academic success and cultural consciousness are developed simultaneously” (Gay, 2018, p. 42). When framing literacy around an ethos of cultural activism, students who have typically been neglected or overlooked begin to reconsider literacy as a means of power and political agency. This can profoundly reshape students’ disengagement with literacy, especially among the African American population of students whose needs educational institutions have not consistently met.

What I came to realize through my examination of historical sites of successful African American literacy development was that modern educators can learn a lot from the past. If leveraged carefully in classrooms today, adapting instructional strategies and materials to align more closely with historically successful methods of African American literacy development could prove deeply transformative. The types of instructional and curricular modifications I propose in this paper are not simply plucked from the pages of history. In addition to their historical practice, they are theoretically grounded in and supported by contemporary conceptions of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy does not just acknowledge students’ cultural conditions but boldly places students’ cultures at the heart of learning. Essentially, students’ cultures are the engines that drive the learning process. Thus, literacy takes on an urgency and utility that empowers students to take action on issues affecting their lives. Culturally sustaining pedagogy fights against the monoculturalism that is prevalent in curriculum and instruction today, in favor of perpetuating, fostering, and sustaining “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). This is a far cry from many of the current

policies and measures that aim at standardization and uniformity as the main means of closing the achievement gap.

This study combines a historical survey with an analysis of current educational theory surrounding culturally sustaining pedagogy. Each of these two domains individually contain vast research. McHenry's (2002) seminal work, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, provided extensive information regarding the formation, evolution, operation, and impact of literary societies. Further, Christian's (2016) *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader* served as a foundation to my study of the literary activity of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. These two works, in addition to various other historical publications and primary sources, informed my understanding and appreciation for the literary development of African Americans during these historical periods. The educational theory this paper is situated within, culturally sustaining pedagogy, is attributed mainly to Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2017). Yet, culturally sustaining pedagogy emerges from a legacy of culturally based pedagogies. Such voices from the multicultural education field including Ladson-Billings, Gay, and Morrell, among others. These scholarly antecedents of Paris and Alim, and the evolution of culturally based pedagogies, will be investigated further in the next section.

Of note, while I promote a seemingly specific kind of culturally empowering education throughout this study, referred to henceforth as culturally sustaining pedagogy, there exists a multitude of names for this type of teaching and learning. The at-times perplexing variety of multicultural education strands should not detract from the ultimate intention: to equip teachers with the courage and knowledge to carry out instructional practices and curricular modifications that validate, empower, and call to action their African American students.

I was inspired to pursue a course of study into the fusion of these two fields (historical and educational) after coming across the work of Tatum and Muhammad (2012), who briefly posited the possibility of referencing the rich literary traditions of African Americans in our mission to improve literacy education for these students today. According to my research, there are allusions to the synthesis of fields concerning African American literacy, but few that fully explore the potential of bringing them together. As such, this study aims to open up this conversation and shed light on cultural literacy practices of immediate value for students in today's classrooms.

I will first provide a theoretical framework within which to position modern day literacy education enacting a culturally sustaining pedagogy. Following this framework, I will turn back the clock and explore African American literary societies of the 1800s. In doing so, I will convey the general background, objectives, and operations of a typical literary society. Next, I will survey the literary practices of the Harlem Renaissance, focusing on the print culture of African American literary magazines and literature anthologies. Finally, these historical sites of African American literacy development and the practices they engendered will be positioned within a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

## **A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY**

### **Background**

Education is a sociocultural process (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006). Unfortunately, in far too many American classrooms culture has been neglected and even systematically excluded—intentionally or unintentionally—from curriculum and instruction. The consequences of such omission manifest in the aforementioned academic underachievement of African American students. The process of rewriting this narrative begins with a reorientation to the role of culture in education and the ways through which culturally sustaining pedagogy in the English classroom can liberate, empower, and transform.

Culture and literacy have an eternally reciprocal relationship. They simply cannot be divorced. As this study will investigate, historically, culture and literacy are developed simultaneously. To better understand this reciprocal relationship, it is valuable to trace the history of educational theory in regard to culturally based pedagogies. The 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, established that racial segregation of public school students is unconstitutional. Following this watershed ruling, African American students began attending school with white students, initiating a cultural crossroads in educational philosophy. Deficit approaches to education gained momentum in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. As the term implies, the deficit model considered the varied aspects of a student's culture as deficiencies or weaknesses that inhibited learning: "The goal of deficit approaches was to eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and to replace them with what were viewed as superior practices" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). These so-called superior practices were predominantly entrenched in white,

middle-class norms of knowledge and learning. Deficit approaches evolved into difference approaches in the 1970s and 1980s. Difference approaches acknowledged students' cultures, but still expected students to shed their own cultures in order to succeed in school (Paris, 2012). It was not until the onset of resource pedagogies that educators began rethinking the position and value of students' cultures in the learning process.

Instrumental to the development of resource pedagogies was what Moll and Gonzalez (1994) term *funds of knowledge*, or the out-of-school resources a student brings to the classroom. Inviting students' out-of-school knowledge and skills into the classroom provided a way to better engage students in learning and make learning more meaningful and lasting. Also contributing to the emergence of resource pedagogies was work on the Third Space concept by Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejada (1999). Foundational to their concept is that "learning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscripted" (p. 287). Hybridity and diversity are the two bases of this theory. Gutierrez et al. posit that in the combination of unofficial spaces (home and community practices) and official spaces (school practices), students and teachers create a dynamic third space that synthesizes and extends upon unofficial and official spaces. Hence, the hybridity.

As the field of multicultural education expanded into the realm of resource pedagogies, certain voices began ushering in a new era of culturally based teaching and learning. Foremost among these was Ladson-Billings's (1995b) articulation of culturally relevant pedagogy. She outlines three criteria for culturally relevant pedagogy: "An ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 483). Following in a similar conceptual vein as Ladson-Billings was Gay, who furthered Ladson-Billings's work and established her own

version of culturally responsive pedagogy, the origins of which can be traced to Cazden and Leggett (1981) and Erickson and Mohatt (1982). According to Gay (2018), culturally responsive pedagogy “simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; community-building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring” (p. 52).

Central to both culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies is empowerment. In critically studying how knowledge is constructed, by whom, and for what end, students begin to move away from a conception of information that may be presented in classrooms and classroom materials as objective “truth.” As McLaren (2002) notes,

Knowledge acquired in school—or anywhere, for that matter—is never neutral or objective but is ordered and structured in particular ways; its emphases and exclusions partake of a silent logic. Knowledge is a social construct deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations. (p. 63)

Power relations are constantly affecting the lives of African American students inside and outside of class. Thus, Ladson-Billings and Gay place emphasis on shaping literacy practices to align and connect with students’ lived realities outside of school. In their estimation, inviting the real life issues confronting students into the classroom, using them as engaging sources of literacy, and then turning these literacies into social action is the ultimate charge of an English teacher.

In Gay’s (2018) third edition of *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, she attempts to account for the rapid and recent globalization of the multicultural education field, while remaining *responsive* to students’ cultural needs. But with the dynamic nature of culture and the increasing

pluralism of our society today, some question whether Ladson-Billings and Gay go far enough in their conceptions of culturally based pedagogies. Paris (2012) claims,

Relevance and responsiveness do not guarantee in stance or meaning that one goal of an educational program is to maintain heritage ways and to value cultural and linguistic sharing across difference, to sustain and support bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism. (p. 95)

Paris offers up a new iteration of culturally based pedagogy that inevitably draws upon, honors, and extends the various scholarship in resource pedagogies and multicultural education. Termed culturally sustaining pedagogy, Paris (2012) marks the distinctions within his theory:

The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. (p. 95)

The pluralistic base of Paris's theory supports the notion and importance of both within-group cultural practices and common, across group cultural practices (Paris, 2012). In our increasingly globalized world, Paris and Alim (2014) suggest that it is not a given that “White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past will remain so as our society changes” (p. 89). Paris and Alim (2014) argue in favor of shifting away from an agenda of teaching minority students to write and speak according to white, middle class norms, and toward a pedagogy that focuses on the “heritage and contemporary practices of students and communities of color” (p. 87). Race,

culture, and language are complex and fluid. Therefore, Paris and Alim urge educators to sustain traditional and evolving cultural practices of students through culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Ladson-Billings (2014) herself acknowledges how just as culture is fluid and ever changing, so is scholarship. She urges scholars and practicing educators to move in the direction of culturally sustaining pedagogy due to her dissatisfaction with “what seems to be a static conception of what it means to be culturally relevant” (p. 77). Ladson-Billings (2014) commends Paris and Alim in their efforts to move the field of culturally based pedagogies in the direction of globalization. As classrooms take on ever more diverse profiles, teachers need a pedagogy that moves education in the direction of hybridity, fluidity, and complexity (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Paris and Alim assert the multidimensional and evolving nature of culture and identity. Thus, I by no means assume African American students’ educational experiences and existences are monolithic. Throughout this study I reflect on African American literate lives generally and historically. I could not possibly account for each individual situation. Every story’s context, characters, and plot vary. Same is true for African American lives. I utilize Paris’s culturally sustaining pedagogy as a framework within which to situate common educational experiences of African American students and potential opportunities for teachers to enhance their students’ literacy development.

Further, the globalized perspectives of Paris and Alim’s work are imperative for all students, not just African American students. This study focuses on a specific racial population of students, but the philosophical, theoretical, and practical underpinnings of culturally sustaining pedagogy applies to all students. As I have established, our society, ergo the classroom, is racially, ethnically, and linguistically evolving. Students who are monocultural and monolingual will soon be at a disadvantage. Paris and Alim (2014) posit,

As a result of continuing demographic change toward a majority multilingual society of color, fostering linguistic and cultural flexibility has an instrumental purpose for both students of color and White students: multilingualism and multiculturalism are increasingly linked to access and power in U.S. and global contexts. (p. 87)

So, why have I chosen to focus my research on its application with African American students when culturally sustaining pedagogy serves all students? Beyond the achievement statistics I have shared and beyond the historical connections I will make, evaluating “success among the students who [have] been least successful [is] likely to reveal important pedagogical principles for achieving success for *all* students” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76). Ladson-Billings (2014) points out, “A literature that tells us what works for middle-class, advantaged students typically fails to reveal the social and cultural advantages that make their success possible” (p. 76). I seek to show how a culturally sustaining pedagogy stance opens up space for all students to succeed, while honoring and extending their cultures. These pillars of practice will subsequently guide my explanation: teacher attitudes and philosophies, cultural communication, pluralistic curriculum content, and culturally aligned instructional strategies.

### **Teacher Attitudes and Philosophies**

Teaching, learning, and literacy are inherently political acts, carried out by political agents (Morrell, 2005). A political thread is woven throughout culturally sustaining pedagogy with teachers as active leaders of a social justice-oriented learning community. Paris and Alim (2014) define the goal of this pedagogy as thus: “To perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (p. 88). At the core of those who practice a culturally sustaining pedagogy is an unwavering commitment to honoring the pluralism present

within a classroom. Teachers can use the inherent diversity of students as the foundation of their pedagogy. This creates a culturally critical classroom environment. Culturally sustaining pedagogy pushes English teachers (and students) “to grapple with the ways that claiming difference and reinforcing division through text and, at times, cutting across those differences and divisions can make shared cultural spaces possible and productive” (Paris, 2010, p. 289). This pedagogy is inclusive of all races and ethnicities, and thus, can be applied to every classroom.

A teacher guided by culturally sustaining pedagogy does not approach education with an assimilationist attitude. Instead, this teacher seeks to leverage students’ funds of knowledge in order to create deeper engagement and more personally enriching academic experiences. Teachers who enact culturally sustaining pedagogy believe in the holistic nature of education and “view learning as having intellectual, academic, personal, social, ethnic, and political dimensions” (Gay, 2018, p. 53). Culturally sustaining pedagogy calls upon educators to view students’ lives, cultures, and practices carried out beyond the walls of school as academically viable. Lee (2017) positions culturally sustaining pedagogy in an ecological frame, involving the interrelated and overlapping human influences in a student’s life: individual, family, school, and community. She states, “These constructs are asking teachers to take into account aspects of youths’ lives outside the classroom not only as resources, but as targets of learning to be sustained” (p. 262). Culturally sustaining pedagogy does not just approach these funds of knowledge as bridges to mainstream academic knowledge, content, and practices; rather, they are synthesized with mainstream academic knowledge and approaches to create new sources of truth and dynamic educational products. Culturally sustaining pedagogy springs from the intersection of students’ in-school and out-of-school lives. To achieve this synergy, teachers

carrying out culturally sustaining pedagogy must value the diversity of each student and hold holistic development of students as a primary objective.

This type of teaching is hard work. Culturally sustaining teachers must continually acquire knowledge surrounding cultural practices and ethnic diversity, perform self-reflection, and courageously engage in conversations regarding social justice and educational equity (Gay, 2018). The culturally sustaining teacher relentlessly cares for students and this care comes to life through academic expectations, instructional practices, and curricular decisions that holistically benefit students.

### **Cultural Communication**

Gay (2018) posits that many teachers are cultural hegemonists. Such teachers have a standard idea of normative school behavior, to which they expect all students—regardless of cultural identity—to comply. These normative behaviors include ways of speaking, participating, interacting, expressing, and behaving. Due to the cultural communication disconnect between teacher and student, many African American students are punished for behavior that is only offensive in that it does not fit traditional (white) conceptions of school conduct. Groeger, Waldman, and Eads (2018) report that in Washington, D.C., African American students are 11.7 times as likely to be suspended, compared with white students. In Indiana, African American students make up 12 percent of the student population; however, they account for 36 percent of the state's out-of-school suspension population. Nationally, African American students are 3.9 times more likely to be suspended, compared to white peers. Though these discipline statistics are not exclusively tied to cultural communication differences and misunderstandings, these figures draw attention to the ways in which teachers are potentially not properly acknowledging

and utilizing their African American students' cultural communication patterns as classroom resources. Tatum (2009) laments the fact that all too often African American students

Have their smiles, their childhood, their silliness, and their humanity neglected as they are viewed as at-risk, as delinquent, and as behavior problems. As a result they are rendered invisible or adopt a psyche of invisibility. (p. xviii)

To be a culturally sustaining educator means to constantly validate each student's humanity and cultural affiliation. For teachers to break through possible barriers of cultural hegemony within the classroom, they need to first understand the ways in which their students participate in the learning process; then they need to incorporate these forms of communication into their instructional repertoire. Teachers need to be aware of how verbal and nonverbal communication can affect students' overall motivation to engage in classroom learning (Brown, 2003).

Paris and Kirkland (2011) suggest that by honoring the tie between the oral and written word in youth literacy, and affording students the chance to "express linguistic, ethnic, and countercultural identities across literary spaces," teachers open up room for vernacular literacies within the classroom (p. 189). In their research, Paris and Kirkland found that youth were constantly participating in robust—while perceived "non-academic"—literacies outside of school. Regrettably, most of these literacy practices "happened with little meaningful connection to the other important writing that happens in schools" (p. 189). The authors state that these students yearned for meaningful literacy connections that brought together out-of-school and in-school literacy identities, specifically cultural linguistic identities.

Paris's later work with Alim (2014) intensifies the focus on cultural linguistic identities by promoting multiculturalism *and* multilingualism in the classroom. Viewed dynamically, multilingualism includes the various dialects and vernacular assets of minority students.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy does not propose to eliminate normative school literacies. The goal is to empower students to approach their English classes with confidence that their real life literacies are legitimate tools, which when developed and honed, can produce powerful texts and aid in deconstructing dominant texts. It is important to remember that each student brings to school their own literacies, independent of race or ethnicity. Teachers cannot assume a student's cultural communication practices. In the same regard, there tend to be certain shared cultural literacies. Paris (2010) proposes that by celebrating these cultural practices in the classroom, teachers potentially encourage shared growth. African American students commonly bring several cultural literacy assets to the classroom including call and response, storytelling, narration, and lyricism.

Many African American students have a participation style in which “speakers and listeners are action-provoking partners in the construction of discourse” (Gay, 2018, p. 119). Kochman (1985) terms this style participatory-interactive. In this call-response exchange,

African Americans “gain the floor” or get participatory entry into conversations through personal assertiveness, the strength of the impulse to be involved, and the persuasive power of the point they wish to make, rather than by waiting for an “authority” to grant permission. (Gay, 2018, p. 119)

This type of participation in many ways defies normative classroom behaviors, such as quietly raising a hand and waiting to be called on by the authority figure. It is easy to see how many teachers who Gay (2018) calls cultural hegemonists would view this type of classroom interaction as disruptive, problematic, and even rude. Conversely, a culturally sustaining educator sees this same participation style as a resource that can be utilized in the complex, group effort of meaning-making.

Other traditional African American vernacular literacies are storytelling and narration. Banks-Wallace (2002) claims, “African American oral traditions emphasize storytelling as a tool for providing instruction, building community, nurturing the spirit, and sustaining a unique culture, which includes the language used to express ideas” (p. 417). She goes on to point out that this type of communication serves a higher purpose than simply answering a question or expressing information. Further, storytelling among this population is predicated on interaction and exchange between speaker and listener (i.e. between classmates). Due to this proclivity toward narration, African American students might lean in the direction of dramatic performance, including body language and gesturing; cultural references; rhetorical devices, like repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and improvisation; colloquialisms; and contextual framing (Gay, 2018). Gay (2018) recommends, “Teachers seeking to improve the academic performance of students of color who use topic-associative discourse styles need to incorporate a story-telling motif into their instructional behaviors” (p. 127). A culturally sustaining teacher sees the unique verbal talents their students bring to class as incredible gifts that when applied properly to the study of literacy can greatly enhance learning.

The oral traditions of African American students ought to be celebrated in educational contexts, not punished. Seeing as how literacy is a subject steeped in storytelling, lyricism, and dramatic performance, including African American oral traditions in the classroom is exciting and contains the potential to make literacy deeply meaningful. Culturally sustaining educators understand the participatory and communication styles of their students and work to leverage these talents for academic gain. But teachers must go beyond celebrating vernacular strengths to create an empowering literacy environment; they must also supply students with content and materials that are culturally affirming.

## Pluralistic Curriculum Content

In culturally sustaining pedagogy, it is important that academic content aligns with students' lives beyond the walls of the classroom. Exposure to texts that are empowering, enlightening, and engaging fundamentally shifts African Americans' relationship with reading. Gay (2018) argues, "Information and skills that are potentially powerful become so only through interaction with the interests, aspirations, desires, needs, and purposes of students" (p. 142). Content that is culturally sustaining seeks to uphold and propagate cultural knowledge, information, and practices that are often sidelined in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). Selecting content that is culturally sustaining makes learning accessible and personally relevant. This begins with the texts teachers use in the classroom.

More often than not, the texts students are exposed to in school are Eurocentric, lacking African American voices and perspectives. It is imperative that teachers include a variety of texts, from multiple sources, some of which might be beyond the typical realm of the classroom. Students need opportunities to critically respond to and challenge the Eurocentric presentation of information characteristic of textbooks. Additionally, teachers can expand their conceptions of "classic" texts to include culturally empowering materials for African American students.

McLaren (2002) identifies a concern of focusing on just the traditional literary canon:

Here literacy becomes a weapon that can be used against those groups who are "culturally illiterate," whose social class, race, or gender renders their own experiences and stories as too unimportant to be worthy of investigation. That is, as a pedagogical tool, a stress on the great books often deflects attention away from the personal experiences of students and the political nature of everyday life. Teaching great books is

also a way of inculcating certain values and sets of behaviors in social groups, thereby solidifying the existing social hierarchy. (p. 70)

Teachers do not need to discard traditional texts completely, but rather look to supplement these texts with reading materials that represent and reflect the diversity of society with authenticity, nuance, and complexity. To do so effectively, teachers can seek to bolster their African American students' textual lineages through empowering texts.

Tatum (2009) calls the collection of texts instrumental to one's human development a textual lineage. Harkening to the historical strands of African American literacy development, textual lineage suggests a genealogical connection. Fittingly, students who have a well-defined textual lineage possess a deep relationship to meaningful and significant literary experiences that have served to connect them to their past, their present, and provide the grounds upon which to project onto the future. An essential function of literacy is to imbue the reader with a sense of identity, purpose, and place. Without an established textual lineage, students are like those who lack genealogical grounding. This can be dissociating and uninspiring.

To reverse this trend and move toward a culturally sustaining pedagogy, educators need to deliberately put texts in the hands of their students that will awaken their consciousness and engender a positive relationship with literacy. Tatum (2008) points to four characteristics of texts that have significance and meaning for African American students generally:

1. They contribute to a healthy psyche.
2. They focus on collective struggle.
3. They provide a road map for being, doing, and acting.
4. They provide modern awareness of the real world.

Texts that accomplish these aims are believed to be enabling, meaning they “move beyond a solely cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include social, cultural, spiritual, or economic focus” (Tatum, 2008, p. 164). Rarely do African Americans experience enabling texts in school. More commonly, they have texts placed before them that strengthen their perceptions of being a struggling reader or *different*. Shaping the curriculum to meld with students’ cultural needs and assets, leading to empowerment and activism, is a vital component of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Hill (2011) took a sociocultural approach to literacy as he studied Black book vendors, spanning 2005 to 2009. The main focus of his ethnographic study was a popular Philadelphia bookstore, Rasul’s. Rasul’s held a reputation as a “site for alternative, oppositional, and political texts about people of African descent” (Hill, 2011, p. 42). Some popular books at the store included *The Isis Papers* by Welsing, *Message to the Black Man in America* by Muhammad, *Soledad Brother* by Jackson, and *Behold a Pale Horse* by Cooper, in addition to books ranging in topic from Black Nationalism to African art to natural hair (Hill, 2011). This alternative course of study spoke directly to the interests and cultural needs of African Americans and “challenged mainstream discourses, ideologies, identities, and texts” (Hill, 2011, p. 43). Rasul’s provided a portal to intellectual traditions many African Americans struggled to find in school.

Hill discovered adolescents at Rasul’s at times of the day when they should have been in school. These students’ presence at the bookstore demonstrated their deep desire to learn information of personal and cultural value. The issue in school is not students’ interest in learning; the issue is an interest in learning a curriculum that has no cultural connection to the student. One such student, Sean, commented, “When I go to school, I read a lot of stuff that’s good for getting in college and being able to talk to White people and rich people and stuff. But

in here I get the real stuff that I need to understand what's going on in the world, and to talk to *my people*" (Hill, 2011, p. 44). Another student commented, "When I first came into the store, I didn't know that Black people had written books about real stuff like history and science. In school, we only read books by White people that talk about that kind of stuff" (Hill, 2001, p. 46). As these students frequented Rasul's, they began to see the wider impact of culturally sustaining literacy practices.

These adolescents began renegotiating their identities; identities that up until their interaction with Rasul's had been dormant, under-celebrated, and under-examined in school. Hill (2011) observed, "They went from passive consumers of knowledge to engaged intellectuals for whom the practice of reading was the seedbed of individual transformation and social activism" (p. 47). Further, these young people started extending their notions of literacy beyond individual enlightenment to intellectual and social leadership within their communities (Hill, 2011). Activism and social justice became central pillars to their literary endeavors. For many of Rasul's patrons, reading texts by and about African Americans encouraged them to venture deeper into their own writing pursuits with bolstered confidence. Hill (2011) concluded, "Rasul's provides a powerful counternarrative to public and academic conversations about political disengagement, anti-intellectualism, and cultural pathology among Black people" (p. 49).

Rasul's offers a glimpse into the literary potential of African American students as well as endorses a culturally sustaining pedagogy agenda. This example demonstrates how when culturally aligned texts are placed in the hands of African Americans, this population has the potential to be as ravenous and engaged readers and writers as any other group.

The contextualization of literacy for African American students cannot be overly stressed. Many students are missing out on a rich literary life, simply because there is little of

their own culture in the curriculum. As students begin to experience texts rooted in their own lived experiences, literacy takes on an urgent primacy. Literacy starts to carry a practical utility that leads to action. Without a connection to the text or a purpose for reading, literacy development staggers. Placing high-quality, culturally sustaining texts in students' hands is half the battle. The other half is in properly guiding the student through the text: the instruction. When mediating a text, teachers can take specific steps to increase student engagement.

### **Culturally Aligned Instruction**

Making cultural habits and teaching-learning styles congruent positively affects academic achievement (Gay, 2018). Skill and strategy instruction are integral to literacy education; however, the utility of such skills and strategies must be made explicit. Culturally sustaining pedagogy embeds learning within familiar contexts for students. This is the foundation upon which all instruction builds. Among the numerous instructional strategies associated with this pedagogy, multimodal performativity specifically allows educators to both embed learning in familiar contexts for students and engage students by allowing them to incorporate their cultural knowledge into the learning process (Paris, 2010). This instructional stance can be applied to reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking—all of which are pivotal to literacy development. According to Paris (2010), multimodal performativity “spans various media between the oral and written, the textual and otherwise symbolic, the static world and the moving world, and the dominant voice and the marginalized one” (p. 279). Keeping in line with the pluralistic and hybrid goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy, multimodal instruction opens up space for students to guide the learning process via their own cultural traditions.

A key component to culturally sustaining instruction is that teachers must begin “revisioning school writing” and legitimize the various Englishes and dialects of their students

(Paris, 2010, p. 280). This can be a difficult task for English teachers, most of whom have been formally trained in Dominant American English<sup>2</sup>. Yet, to make literacy personally meaningful and empowering, culturally sustaining pedagogy demands teachers to begin thinking of language as a pluralistic, dynamic, and evolving process. At its core, “enacting difference in contemporary multiethnic schools” occurs at the intersection of language, culture, and learning (Paris, 2010, p. 280). Culturally sustaining pedagogy does not call for the complete eradication of dominant academic language norms. It does, however, seek to offer students the chance to utilize their well-developed and well-practiced languages in the classroom. The English classroom is a site of “linguistic and sociolinguistic inquiry,” so it makes sense that teachers embrace students’ out-of-school language practices as opportunities for legitimate academic study (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018, p. 50).

Culturally sustaining teachers are not expected to speak or even fully understand the cultural linguistic practices of students. To effectively create critical conversations and activities surrounding race, culture, and language, teachers can look to incorporate multimodality into their lessons and ground these lessons in sound pedagogical approaches. For example, in their work with translanguaging in the classroom, Seltzer and de los Ríos (2018) helped a high school English teacher whose culture differed from her students introduce multimodal language study. The teacher, Ms. Winter, selected multimodal texts and challenged her students to “analyze the writer’s/performer’s choices in relation to their assumed audience” (p. 63). Her multimodal texts included a sketch comedy video clip from *Key and Peele*, spoken word poem by Jamila Lyiscott

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<sup>2</sup> I use Paris’s (2010) term “Dominant American English (DAE)” in reference to prescriptive English norms that are typically expected in academic settings. Paris (2010) asserts that there are many diverse and academically valid Englishes students bring to and utilize in the classroom. I avoid using “standard” or “academic English” in an attempt to challenge the pervasive position that there is one acceptable English for the classroom.

addressing language, and Larry Wilmore's speech from President Obama's last Correspondent's Dinner (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). Students' analyses of these texts demonstrated a high level of critical thinking in negotiating the racial, cultural, and linguistic aspects of the authors' choices and intended audience. Here we see students not just accepting prescriptive Dominant American English, but questioning it, challenging it, and positioning other forms of English alongside it. Students were critically evaluating language choices and how those choices impacted the overall message. The multimodal texts Ms. Winter chose provided a diverse, modern, and complex canvas upon which students could project their cultural language practices. Seltzer and de los Ríos (2018) indicate the value of this type of instruction:

Through writing and multimodal text production, students can put their (socio)linguistic inquiry to work in ways that challenge ideologies of linguistic separateness and standardization. In this way, English teachers can hone the linguistic creativity that students of color already bring with them... and encourage students to use that creativity in writing to challenge the coloniality and racism that inform English classrooms' hidden audience of white listening subjects. (p. 51)

Paris's (2010) ethnographic fieldwork in a public charter high school aligns with Seltzer and de los Ríos's translanguaging study. Paris (2010) found that many of the students he observed and interviewed pushed back against Dominant American English (DAE), using African American Language (AAL) as an "act of agency and linguistic pride" (p. 282). In resisting DAE, students were challenging the dominant school culture and asserting their own cultural identities. Yet, the linguistic/literate acts these students most frequently and eagerly engaged in were those beyond the perceived academic limits of the classroom: "Classrooms were by and large hostile places to make and perform flows; crafting flows happened most often in

less regulated areas of multiethnic youth space” (Paris, 2010, p. 285). In line with Seltzer and de los Ríos (2018), these students performed acts of literacy that were multimodal in nature. Paris (2009) lamented the fact that though these students’ teachers recognized the pluralism of their students, “there was no mention that a grammar was happening across ethnicity inside and outside the classroom” (p. 444). Paris (2009) states,

Adopting a pedagogy of pluralism would seek to use youth practices of AAL (as well as other heritage languages) in multiethnic schools to embrace, problematize, and extend understandings of interethnic language sharing and understandings of ethnic and linguistic solidarity. Such a pedagogical orientation puts schools in position to be sites of critical language learning that could bolster the pride of African American youth about their linguistic heritage, while simultaneously fostering more conscious respect from youth of other ethnic backgrounds. (p. 444)

Paris (2010) celebrates the textual dexterity of the students he studied. They performed cultural literacies frequently and creatively. They consumed and produced texts that carried cultural weight and meaning in their everyday lives. It is the charge of culturally sustaining English teachers today to “learn to read these texts and meaningfully incorporate them into classroom lessons about audience, purpose, grammars, difference, and power” (Paris, 2010, p. 289). Language is the ultimate site of power relations. Deconstructing dominant texts (and language) and creating texts in the fight for social justice is a central tenet of Morrell’s (2005) critical English education that underpins culturally sustaining pedagogy. Teachers can employ certain strategies that position their students to carry out multilingual and multicultural learning, to the benefit of all students.

It should be noted that there are no instructional strategies that specifically apply to one cultural group. Culturally sustaining pedagogy embraces pluralism and the fluidity of culture, which means strategies that align with this pedagogy serve all students as democratic citizens in an increasingly diverse society. Among the myriad possibilities inherent to this pedagogy, I will present three instructional strategies: project-based learning, multimodal performativity, and collaborative learning.

In project based learning, students “solve real-world problems by designing their own inquiries, planning their learning, organizing their research, and implementing a multitude of learning strategies” (Bell, 2010, p. 39). Culturally sustaining teachers structure platforms of action for students to practice and enact their literacy skills. Enacting literacy in the larger sociopolitical context of students’ lives can help students develop a social justice orientation (Paris & Alim, 2017). When students can see the application of their in-school learning to real life situations, they are empowered to become agents of social change through literacy. As students participate in learning projects that are valuable to their lives, their literacy practices assume a practical, contextualized utility that is often missing in traditional classroom literacy activities. Through social justice-based projects, students are encouraged to utilize various learning modes.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to build literacy capacity through a combination of cultural competence and academic strengths. Further, it invites students to create meaning from texts using multiple modes. For instance, students construct knowledge via print text, digital text, audio, video, and images. Portfolios and multimedia projects can give students the opportunity to expand their literary capacity by venturing into multimodal spaces, blending their out-of-school literacies and cultures with in-school activities. Multiple text types and various resources are

integrated into the learning process to enhance students' conceptual understanding (Boyd & Tochelli, 2014). What's more, students are invited to present their understanding through multimodal means.

Presenting information in a multimodal fashion can prove impactful for African American students, as Gay (2018) proposes that African American students commonly prefer "learning situations that are active, participatory, emotionally engaging, and filled with visual and physical stimulation" (p. 229). Thus, teachers can build space for dramatic performance in their literacy instruction. Bringing poetry, music, quotations, scripts, and speeches into the classroom can potentially appeal to African American students' penchant for literary expressiveness. Allowing students to give presentations or lead lessons can potentially appeal to more expressive students. Further, structured debates provide grounds for students to engage in repartee that befits those who thrive in interpersonal, interactive learning. The performative nature of this strategy inherently creates a collaborative learning environment, wherein students are encouraged to reach higher levels of thinking together.

Haynes and Gebreyesus (1992) posit that cooperative learning can potentially serve African American students well, due to their cultural socialization, family structures, and social organization. Gay (2018) comments on the mutual support and expectations that come with this type of classroom: "They [students] are expected to internalize the value that learning is a communal, reciprocal, interdependent affair, and manifest it habitually in their expressive behaviors" (p. 38). To kindle collaborative learning, teachers can incorporate group work, literature circles, jigsaw, peer evaluation, and Socratic seminar, among others.

### **Conclusion (and Looking Forward)**

Paris and Alim (2014) offer up a question each teacher should carefully consider: “What if, indeed, the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their heritage and community practices?” (p. 86). Culturally sustaining pedagogy deliberately weaves together African American students’ cultural competencies and academic instruction and materials. The problem in countless classrooms today is that these students are disengaged, bored, and disconnected from learning. Their discontentment and underachievement is understandable; as Gay (2018) points out, these students “are not being taught in school like they learn in their cultural communities” (p. 243). Creating cultural congruency in the educational process should be of the highest importance for teachers.

As outlined in this section, culturally sustaining pedagogy depends on four pillars: (1) teacher attitudes and philosophies, (2) cultural communication, (3) pluralistic curriculum content, and (4) culturally aligned instruction. Using these pillars as the framework for effective African American literacy education, I will hereon describe then connect historical practices of African American literacy development to these modern conceptions of culturally sustaining pedagogy. I will illuminate the ways in which flourishing literacy lives of African Americans historically have been anchored in central tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy. This connection will serve to expand educators’ modern notions of literacy practices and how to best serve their African American students. As Paris and Alim (2014) assert, “Culture is dynamic, shifting, and encompassing both past-oriented heritage dimensions and present-oriented community dimensions. These dimensions in turn are not entirely distinct but take on different salience depending on how young people live race, ethnicity, language, and culture” (p. 90). In surveying

the past, I hope to illuminate a potentially culturally richer approach to teaching literacy to African American students in the contemporary classroom. I will begin with a study of literary societies of the 1800s and then transition into the Harlem Renaissance, taking place in the early 1900s.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY SOCIETIES OF THE 1800S**

### **Introduction**

Ironically, literacy has historically been the key to both oppression and emancipation among African Americans. Fisher (2009) posits that in America, “The outlawing of literacy for enslaved Africans established the relationships between literacy, power, and humanity” (p. 15). That is, literacy has deep connections to one’s humanity and citizenship. Slave owners in America sought to deny and suppress this humanity in their slaves, thus prohibiting access to education, reading and writing specifically. For African Americans, the desire to acquire literacy was predominately entrenched in the desire to gain freedom and power. Their quest for literacy has historically risen from a place of struggle, resistance, and determination. Despite the institutional, social, and political barriers inhibiting their literacy acquisition, through great resolve these individuals carved out educational opportunities for themselves. African Americans established sites of learning beyond and outside of traditional classrooms and facilitated flourishing literacy within their communities.

McHenry (2002) frames my line of study into African Americans’ historical quest for literacy with essential questions I seek to explore further: “What institutions have centered the literary experiences of African Americans? Where has literacy been practiced and literature enjoyed, discussed, and debated? How have literary texts been acquired and exchanged?” (p. 10). Diving deeply into these questions reveals how and why African Americans were able to foster such rich literacies, despite the many obstacles and adversity they faced in pursuing education. What ultimately fueled literacy among this population was not a brick and mortar institution, but instead the communal nature of literacy. Communal literacy among African Americans can be

traced back centuries, but it took a distinctly defined shape with the emergence of literary societies in the 1800s.

Literary societies, also called reading rooms, lyceums, and debate societies, formed in northern urban areas with larger African American populations. Philadelphia, New York City, Washington D.C., Detroit, Boston, and Baltimore were but a handful of metropolitan regions home to literary societies. These societies met in churches, unused buildings, libraries, auditoriums, and even in members' homes. Most literary societies operated officially with established preambles and constitutions, membership dues, and routine operations (Muhammad, 2012).

Literary societies carried out many practical functions. Beyond the obvious goal of increasing members' literacy, these societies equipped members with reading materials through lending libraries. Donated books, manuscripts, historical papers, globes, maps, dictionaries, magazines, documents, and other texts all populated the library (Porter, 1936). African American newspapers and magazines were of special interest to members. Especially popular were the likes of *Christian Recorder*, *Colored American*, *National Reformer*, *Elevator*, and *Liberator* (Belt-Beyan, 2004). Some literary societies produced their own periodicals and newspapers. Doing so gave members a site of publication for their writing. Also, through these publications societies were able to distribute important information pertaining to their gatherings.

A few of the earliest literary societies were The Reading Room Society for Men of Colour in Philadelphia established in 1828, the New York African Clarkson Society established in 1829, the New York Philomathean Society established in 1830, the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons established in 1833, the Rush Library and Debating Society established in 1836, and the Ladies Literary Society established in 1834, among others

(Muhammad, 2012). There were male-only, female-only, and co-educational literary societies. In some instances, abolitionists and abolitionist groups supported the mission of these societies. Meetings usually took place in the evenings and featured an array of literary pursuits, ranging from group readings of literature to music to debate.

Information regarding literary societies was primarily shared through word of mouth, pamphlets, and newspapers. In 1833 abolitionist Samuel Cornish published a letter in support of the Phoenix Society, one of the most well-known literary societies located in New York City. Cornish writes, “The objects of the institution are general improvement and the training of our youth to habits of reading and reflection” (p. 5). He solicits donations of books, volumes, maps, journals, papers, and money. What follows this solicitation is an explanation of the society’s operations:

1st. The rooms will be open Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 4 to 9 o’clock, P.M.

2nd. There will be a 4, a 6, and an 8 o’clock class of readers. These classes may consist of 25 or 30 or more—each class having selected its course of reading and appointed the readers, whose duty it shall be to read for one hour. All the classes shall note prominent facts, and then retire into the adjacent room to converse on the subjects, together with occurrences of the day, calculated to cultivate the mind and improve the heart.

3rd. We propose to have a course of lectures delivered, on morals, economy and the arts and sciences, and all the readers earnestly solicited to enlist in those causes. (p. 5)

Illustrated by Cornish’s letter, literary societies had multiple aims: stimulate reading among African Americans, foster the spreading of useful information and knowledge, equip members with texts to read, encourage literary efforts by providing audiences as critics, present

channels of publication for written products, and supply an arena for orators and leaders to hone their skills through debate (Porter, 1936). During the 1800s there were few opportunities for African Americans to engage in this type of literacy learning. Establishing literary societies was an effort on the part of African Americans to institutionalize their literacy traditions.

Literary societies had larger cultural ramifications beyond the immediately practical goals of increasing African Americans' literacy capacities. In seeking to understand how and why literacy was so central to the lives of those African Americans who participated in literary societies, it is important to analyze the significance with which these individuals imbued literacy. In shaping my discussion of literary societies going forward, I will use Franklin and Anderson's (1978) three categories of educational activities of African American literary societies. They include: "Education in the black heritage, education for individual and community development, and education for black social and political advancement" (p. 114). These three categories will help frame my argument of how and why African American literacy development in the contexts of literary societies flourished. It is important to note that these categories are not isolated from each other; education in the black heritage, individual and community development, and social and political advancement are intertwined. But, breaking them apart for individual evaluation provides culturally sustaining educators today a heightened understanding and appreciation for how to potentially better serve the literacy needs of their African American students.

### **Education in the Black Heritage**

In 1895, at the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States, Matthews delivered an address titled "The Value of Race Literature," later published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1896. She spoke to the need for African Americans to establish a literary tradition. She said, "Our history and individuality as a people, not only provides material for masterly

treatment; but would seem to make a Race Literature a necessity as an outlet for the unnaturally suppressed inner lives which our people have been compelled to lead” (p. 173). Matthews went on to express her displeasure with the degrading caricatures so many authors of the time used to portray African Americans. She urged those in attendance to craft—in an act of empowerment and resistance—authentic and accurate depictions of African Americans through literature.

Matthews argued that African Americans had a duty to combat racist representations and take pride in their heritage. Matthews questioned, “Are we adding to the structure planned for us by our pioneers? Do we know our dwelling and those who under many hardships, at least, gathered the material for its building? Knowing them do we honor—do we love them—what they have done and what we should love?” (p. 177). Matthews continued on in her address to recognize successful African American writers. She showed African Americans that a literary tradition among the race existed. And that it was worthy of celebration. Matthews’s address is in line with the efforts on behalf of many in the 1800s to inspire racial pride and a cultural consciousness. Both racial pride and cultural consciousness were fundamental to literary societies’ attempt at providing education in black heritage.

One of the main accomplishments of literary societies was the promotion of empowering texts and the evolution of an African American textual lineage. Members of literary societies consumed and produced texts by, for, and about African Americans. The works they addressed in meetings transcended cognitive skill development; they sparked members’ humanity by appealing to their broader political, economic, social, and cultural consciousness. Issues of the day were of prime importance. Texts that spoke to the condition of African Americans in original and genuine ways were pivotal to literary societies. They encouraged consideration for and debate around significant issues in members lives.

The pioneers of literary societies set out to discover, honor, and disseminate African American literary history. Literary societies preserved cultural products such as personal narratives, diaries, biographies, songs, poems, prayers, sermons, speeches, essays, and other literary artifacts created by African Americans. Newspapers such as the *Christian Recorder* and *Weekly Anglo-African* were widely distributed among literary societies. These publications provided a variety of information and entertainment for literary society members. For instance, *Freedom's Journal* published domestic news in the January 11, 1828 issue announcing, in regard to the Legislature of South Carolina, "A bill to prohibit the public and private instruction of free persons of color in reading and writing underwent discussion at some length on its second reading, and was, after being amended, sent to the Senate" (n.p.). Political updates such as this allowed literary societies to stay in touch with current events affecting members' lives. Engagement with text in this capacity afforded not only the opportunity to expand literacy skills, but also to interact with texts that carried personal, cultural, and political relevance.

In addition, literary magazines such as *Repository of Religion and Literature, and of Science and Art* and *Anglo-African Magazine* were upheld as channels for the literary representation of African Americans and frequently circulated within literary societies. For instance, Stewart's short story "The First Stage of Life" was serialized in three installments—April, July, and October, 1861—in *Repository of Religion and Literature, and of Science and Art*. Stewart's story centers on the coming-of-age of an African American girl. Wright (2015) describes the importance of this work:

Stewart's short story about an orphaned black girl named Letitia serves to define community networks as vital for black women's survival against the impact of laws passed during the pre-Civil War era. Letitia's growth from abject to aware with the help

of a worthy and nurturing black community allegorizes the personal effects of an increasingly hostile white culture on the everyday lives of African American women in the antebellum period. (p. 151)

Stewart's story, among other literary works published in African American newspapers and literary magazines, encouraged the development of a cultural literary tradition, replete with empowering texts. Literary societies directed their reading toward texts such as Stewart's that grappled with and challenged the oppression prevalent in their lives. From fiction to non-fiction to poetry, texts were carefully selected that would (a) help establish an African American literary tradition and (b) help African Americans understand their sociopolitical standing, equip them with the skills to articulate it, and empower them to combat it.

Engaging with empowering texts and establishing an African American literary tradition did not come at the expense of exposure to classic works of literature. On the contrary, literary societies valued an education in the classical canon. Take for instance the popular anti-slavery newspaper led by Frederick Douglass, the *North Star* and known later as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. This newspaper included works by notable European American authors: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Beecher Ward, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville (McHenry, 2002). But, Douglass shrewdly placed the works of these authors side-by-side on the pages of his newspaper with the works of African American authors. In doing this, McHenry (2002) notes that Douglass "effectively advanced the unprecedented idea of their creative parity" (p. 125). Unabashed, Douglass printed works of renowned European authors, including Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (McHenry, 2002). Douglass essentially disregarded the established cultural hierarchy by placing these works on an equal level, in the physical sense of their publication and presentation. This act of literary

insurgence supported the establishment of a respected African American literary tradition. Members of literary societies who opened the pages of Douglass's newspaper were forced to consider works from people like themselves alongside heralded masterpieces. The psychological effects of this literary equality were profound. African Americans were relentlessly reminded of their inferiority in social, political, and economic realms. To hold equal standing, possibly for one of the first times, must have been empowering. And the source of that empowerment was literacy. As Douglass challenged the hierarchy of literature in his newspaper, literary society members began to fundamentally reshape the notions of a dominant American literature by expanding their text selection. McHenry (2002) relates the ways in which many literary society women questioned established literary standards:

Their attention to texts that definitively lay outside conventional canons of literature, such as those by African Americans and by women, highlights their desire to recalibrate the value of those works. By reading texts by members of their own race and those by women alongside texts determined by mainstream academic circles and the dominant cultural tradition to be "authors of worth and literary standing," black women demonstrated the extent to which they both embraced and chafed against standard notions of culture. This tension forced the reassessment and redefinition of what constituted literature and literary study in crucial and lasting ways. (p. 228)

Literary societies were sites to challenge cultural hegemony. African Americans sought to appreciate classical works, but also to incite racial consciousness through the establishment of their own literary expression. Their American roots were to be culturally specific. In this light, African Americans attempted to expand the boundaries of American literature and simultaneously challenge it (McHenry, 2002).

The activities of literary societies centered on empowering texts. These texts served readers in their human development in addition to their cognitive development. Empowering texts dealt in the matters of members' lives and prompted investigation, discussion, and even action. As literary societies studied and shared empowering texts, they began to build an African American literary tradition. The heritage these members cultivated was developed not in the shadow or imitation of classically esteemed literary works, but in the distinct vein of African American traditions. The growth of an African American literary tradition, featuring empowering texts, set the foundation for literary societies to serve as sites of individual and community development.

### **Education for Individual and Community Development**

Literary societies fostered the advancement of cultural consciousness within the African American individual and community at large. Through the use of empowering texts, situated within an emerging African American literary tradition, members experienced the transformative effects of literacy. The personal intellectual expansion spawned the collective evolution. The leaders of literary societies considered literacy the principal means of collective racial uplift. On the individual level, members actively and critically constructed their identities. The identity construction of the individual was nurtured by the collective and communal act of literacy.

### **Identity Construction**

The individual effects of education proved revolutionary for African Americans in the 1800s. Literacy served as a form of personal liberation. Belt-Beyan (2004) states, "Literacy freedom was associated with the development of an inner self, freedom from ignorance, and freedom to contribute to the record of human experience" (p. 160). For a people who had been

oppressed and stripped of their humanity in America, the self-respect and sovereignty literacy granted cannot be overestimated.

Tatum (2005) relates how prior to the slave trade, African boys were able to develop a healthy sense of “personal power” that contributed to their personal definition of self, identity, and masculinity (p. 26). Once these young men arrived in America as part of the slave trade, they experienced traumatic psychological and spiritual shock. They possessed no rights or political power, and they were forced to conform to Euro-American worldviews (Tatum, 2005). Though slaves carved out a culture of their own, after relentless conditioning on the part of white slave holders, these men came to believe in their inferiority. Dehumanization of slaves was reinforced through legislation, economics, and the arts. Tatum (2005) points out, “Stereotypes of the black male became part of America’s national character. The image of the black male as a subhuman, unintelligent, sexually promiscuous, idle buffoon was everywhere—in stage shows, novels, advertisements, newspapers, magazines—and it took hold of the American psyche” (p. 27). There were few sites for African Americans to combat these depictions.

Literary societies literally and figuratively provided an arena for African Americans to rewrite the script of their lives. Members were able to safely and in a supportive environment grapple with and respond to inaccurate racial stereotypes. This activity prompted identity (re)construction, as African Americans were given space in literary societies to establish their personal power and reclaim their humanity. This was especially true for African American women who responded to racial violence and inequality through literary society practices.

To define self as an African American woman was complex. Racial and gender issues rotated on a precariously unique axis. In an address to the Brooklyn Literary Union in 1892, Harper appeals to the female audience members to cherish their roles in shaping the intellectual

future of the race. She states, “Every mother should endeavor to be a true artist.” Harper goes on to attempt to breach the question of “what constituted an enlightened motherhood?” Speaking to a group gathered at their local literary society, the answer inevitably gravitates toward the refinement and development of the mind via acts of literacy. Harper closes her speech by imploring her audience,

Is there a branch of the human race in the Western Hemisphere which has greater need of the inspiring and uplifting influence that can flow out of the lives of and examples of the truly enlightened than ourselves?...The work of the mothers of our race is grandly constructive. It is for us to build above the wreck and ruin of the past more stately temples of thought and action.

Harper’s address is emblematic of the charge placed on women during this era of literary societies. Some female-only societies emerged, giving African American women venues to define their identities and roles as intellectuals, mothers, wives, and activists. Bethel Historical and Literary Association, Boston Literary and Historical association, and Philadelphia’s Female Literary Association were but a few societies dedicated to the identity construction of African American women via literacy. Women wrote, read, and discussed literature to define the self. This was enhanced by the community support literary societies provided.

### **Literacy as a Collective Endeavor**

Literary societies at their core were sites of community. African Americans historically have found ways to bind together, united under common—often unfortunate—circumstances. In the cases of literary societies, members found common ground in the acquisition of literacy skills and further, in the transmission of these skills and the associated information to other members. The uplift of a race through literacy required a communal spirit. Fisher (2009) asserts, “Part of

becoming ‘literate’ was to assume the responsibility to contribute to one’s immediate and at-large community” (p. 18). For African Americans who participated in literary societies, literacy was not a private, isolated venture; it was an experience—an enlightening—that was to be passed on and shared with others. To keep it for oneself alone would suggest an individual, competitive advantage inherent to possessing literacy. African Americans had very limited individual mobility and influence in social, political, and economic matters of the country at this time. Thus, literacy possessed by one did little to advance an individual; however, literacy wielded by an entire race could potentially prove powerful.

On a practical level, the literacy skills of African Americans were widely divergent. This alone made the communal dimension of literary societies essential. Reading texts aloud was a common practice in literary societies, in an effort to engage and develop those members who had limited, if any, ability to read print. McHenry (2002) commented on this practice by stating, “Cultivating the mind had less to do with basic literacy skills than it did with fostering exposure to literary texts and the discussions they prompted” (p. 54). Literacy was not a competitive event. These societies were environments of mutual respect, compassion, and reciprocity. The success of the group was most valued. Those with greater skill supported those less skilled in the development of a rich literary life. Members acknowledged the responsibility they had to their race to assist each other in racial uplift. McHenry (2002) proposes that society members “saw their literary work as a means of instilling pride in their own community; stressing the importance of racial solidarity and self-help, they struggled to turn the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation” (p. 149). Literary society members fostered a sense of camaraderie in their meetings. One example of such camaraderie was the practice of peer evaluation.

## Peer Evaluation

A common practice in literary societies was the presentation of personal compositions. Creative works, expository papers, and poetry were all shared during meetings (Belt-Beyan, 2004). One such example is the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia. Members would anonymously submit their work and the process of a random selection would dictate which papers were shared aloud with the group (Belt-Beyan, 2004). Following the reading, members provided oral and written feedback. Especially impressive works might find their way to the pages of the society's publication, or regional/national publication (Porter, 1936).

Women's literary societies serve as examples of the impact of peer evaluation in the literary development of African Americans. Women prepared and presented club papers, covering a variety of subjects. Members chose subjects of immediate interest to their lives, such as domestic science, women's roles at home and at work, and education of their children (McHenry, 2002). Members had to conduct research, synthesize information, formulate a position, create a composition, and articulate their argument before their peers. Toward the end of the 1800s as more African American women's clubs formed, clubwomen would travel to other literary societies to share their work (McHenry, 2002). Further, papers and addresses of the highest quality were selected to be presented at national conventions. McHenry (2002) points to the National Conference of Colored Women as one such national venue for clubwomen to share their work with their peers. McHenry (2002) states,

Successfully exposing their texts to the scrutiny of others, both those who supported as well as those skeptical about the intellectual abilities of black women, gave African American clubwomen a sense of confidence in their critical writing. It also offered them a tangible sense of the potential impact of its public presence. (p. 212)

Literary societies and the community they provided set the stage for members to make their writing public. Writing on topics that appealed to their lived realities, literacy in these societies was constantly grounded in issues that had immediate meaning in members' lives. Writing about these issues was not a personal, private action; it was a community-building exercise. Members knew their compositions would be shared publicly, which added a greater urgency and relevance to their literary pursuits. In short, literacy had a purpose, an audience, and utility.

### **Education for Black Social and Political Advancement**

The primary purpose of literacy for African Americans who participated in literary societies was to advance the race socially and politically. Social justice underpinned all literary activity. Members recognized that "in order to effectively perform as public activists, they needed to work individually and collectively to enhance their abilities as articulate speakers, persuasive writers, and critical thinkers" (McHenry, 2002, p. 204). Literary societies promoted an informed, democratic citizenry. Participating in the activities of these societies afforded members the chance to critically engage in issues of the day. Take, for instance, an announcement published in *The Christian Recorder* on December 30, 1886:

#### **ATTENTION, LITERARY SOCIETIES!**

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The literary societies of the A.M.E. Church will hold their anniversary exercises on Monday night, Jan. 3rd, 1887. Pastors and leading ladies and gentlemen in those places where societies are not organized will please make special arrangements for literary entertainment at the churches on this occasion.

#### **PROGRAMME.**

1. Essay, time ten minutes, "How can we help the cause of education?"

#### **MUSIC.**

2. Essay, time ten minutes, "Woman as a worker in the world's redemption."

MUSIC.

3. Oration, time, fifteen minutes, "The great men of the African race."

MUSIC.

4. Debate, time, forty minutes, "Is the preaching of the gospel better adapted to the establishment of justice among the people than the enforcement of civil law?"

A small fee may be charged for admission or a collection taken on the occasion. Each society is expected to send its annual donation for the support of education immediately to our office. Let every church be represented. We will return receipts for all moneys and print names and amounts in the annual report.

Respectfully,

WM. D. JOHNSON,  
Secretary of Education, Box 263, Athens, Ga.

This advertisement for the A.M.E. literary societies emphasizes the variety and utility of literary pursuits in these meetings. Incorporating essays, music, oration, and debate, this particular program accentuates the various modes involved in literary activity among the African American community. What's more, the content of the literary pursuits is telling. Each portion of the program involves an investigation into questions and topics of immediate interest and practical value to the members. Literacy was honed through the analysis and application of issues in the broader context of the members' lives. In this way literacy was a tool for social justice. Notably, there is no portion of the program dedicated to decontextualized skill and strategy instruction; literacy skills and strategies were refined simultaneous to the members' involvement in practical applications of literacy. In literary societies, literacy development was transformative because of its utility. McHenry (2002) notes, "Reading, writing, and print were increasingly seen to be technologies of power" (p. 42). This prospective political agency placed literacy at the heart of African Americans' lives. The newfound agency that came with heightened literary activity spilled over into the social and political realms of members' lives.

## **Articulating a Voice**

The political voice of African Americans was essentially silenced up until the 1800s. During this time, African Americans began to seek out justice en masse. In literary societies, members discovered their voices. A newfound self-representation permeated literary activity of this time. For a race that had been oppressed for so long, literacy was a mechanism with which to fight back. McHenry (2002) posits,

Their reading and writing were motivated by a desire to expand ideas of liberty and justice and to communicate an identity that was black, American, and, above all, human. Literary societies provided the literal and psychological space where their membership might develop the ability and confidence to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for. (p. 83)

The African American literary tradition is inextricably bound up with its oral tradition. Fisher (2009) suggests that it is a mistake to try to dichotomize literacy and orality among this population. During the time of literary societies, many members were illiterate. Thus, the main inroad to participation in these meetings was oration, including debate. Reading aloud, followed by discussion and debate was common. Other forms of oral performance, like poetry, music/singing, prayer, and hymns were popular. Fisher (2009) states, “Black literate practices demonstrate a dialectic relationship between the word—both spoken and written—with forms of social protest and literary activism” (pp. 25-26). Finding one’s voice and self-expression through communal literacy empowered members to engage with current sociopolitical issues. Vocalizing their desire for social justice became a foundation for racial uplift.

## Democracy and Citizenship

Part of the mission of literary societies was to create a politically and socially informed membership. As established, this was achieved through the reading of newspapers, magazines, speeches, addresses, essays, and other sources of published current events. Further, orators who visited literary societies based their addresses on the political intrigue of the time. Internal debates and discussions encircled politics and the political elevation of the race. Members' political perspectives were fundamentally shaped by their engagement with literacy.

The August 5, 1853 issue of the *Frederick Douglass Paper*—a newspaper popularly read in literary societies—published a speech by American reformer Samuel J. May. Known as an advocate of numerous reform movements, including abolitionism, May sought to stir his predominantly African American audience to action:

This is a day on which we should look to the future, rather than to the past; thinking less of what has been done for us, than of what we are called to do for the present and for future generations. It were a misspending of this hallowed time, merely to indulge in noisy exudations over the partial liberty we ourselves (a portion of the people of this land) enjoy, as a consequence of our fathers' struggles and sacrifices. We ought much more to reflect upon the nature and extent of true liberty; and enquire what we may do to perpetuate, enlarge and [ ] is to be attained, not in what we have inherited, but in what we shall bequeath. Now, we cannot transmit what we do not possess. We must be free ourselves, or we cannot give freedom to others. Men and women! Think not that you are free, because your fathers threw off the yoke of colonial subjection! Think not that you are free because you have no King or hereditary nobility to reign over you. Think not that you are free because you live in a country where the supreme power is said to be in the

hands of the people. Such are, indeed, some of the favorable circumstances in which you are placed; but still you may be in bondage. (n.p.)

May exposes the less obvious, but equally nefarious “bondage” free African Americans faced. Experiencing such texts as May’s in a literary society proved revolutionary. African Americans came together to (a) articulate and acknowledge the oppression and injustices they faced, and what’s more, (b) utilize literacy as a means of resistance to their circumstances. Taking action through literacy allowed African Americans to assert their position within a democracy. According to McHenry (2002), literary societies provided “opportunities to practice and perform literacy and allowed them to experiment with voice and self-representation in ways that approximated the ideals of civic participation” (p. 56). A political agency developed through the exposure to texts and exchange of ideas. The sharpening of cultural consciousness in political matters developed among members to the point where the line between literacy and politics blurred. Fisher (2009) argues that there exists a dialectical relationship between literacy and activism; literacy leads to activism and as a result, activism re-informs literacy. This reciprocity made literary societies important sites of informed citizenship, social justice, and activism.

## LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

### Introduction

African American literary societies continued in existence into the early 1900s. However, these societies took on new appearances as a burgeoning artistic movement within the African American community materialized. African Americans' appetites for literary production and consumption increased and expanded to urge in a unique era of literary development. In greater numbers than ever, African Americans were reading and writing. In this literary quest, African Americans began creating a new cultural image. The refinement of this image took place in their literary pursuits; the emergence of a New Negro found its roots in literature. In 1926, Calverton wrote,

The new negro has become an active force in contemporary America. The great change that has taken place in the psychology of the negro is a thing without parallel in our history. To many it is inexplicable, an enigma. To the ancient in spirit it is a tragedy. It threatens to thwart the race myth. To the progressive it is the auspicious fulfillment of a prophecy. Until recent years the history of the negro in America was checkered with disaster and despair. Yesterday a hope was born. Today that hope, against disadvantage and discouragement, is groping toward solid ground and realization. (p. 694)

The optimism and hope Calverton exudes is representative of the general African American spirit in the outset of the New Negro Era. Racial pride, confidence, and ambition reached new heights. Through literary endeavors, African Americans sought to separate themselves from the "old negro" and its associated racist stereotypes, and begin creating a new definition and aesthetic of African American intellect, politics, economics, and social presence.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to northern cities prompted the beginnings of the New Negro Movement. Specifically, a flurry of artistic expression in Harlem, New York set off a movement that redefined not only the art of African Americans, but their racial representation, too. The architects and intellectuals behind the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro literature included W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, and James Weldon Johnson. Authors and poets the likes of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay made notable and lasting literary contributions to the period. These authors began representing African American life in a new, modern light. Their works celebrated the cultural renaissance occurring at the time and aimed at creating a distinct genre of African American literature. For this generation of authors, creating an African American literary tradition did not meet its end in publication; the subsequent critical analyses of these works—both public and private—and the artistic responses that resulted were driving forces of African American literacy development.

To accommodate and propagate this critical study of African American literature, original and more robust publication sites materialized. While magazines and newspapers were not new publications for African American writing, the magazines that formed during the Harlem Renaissance approached the curation and cultivation of African American literature differently. The editors of these periodicals embraced their positions as explicit political agents. Feeling the growing racial pride and hope in the New Negro Movement, these editors sought out works that firmly established African Americans as key contributors to the broader American literary tradition and American society at large.

Whereas literary societies of the 1800s created physical spaces of communal literacy, much of the literacy development of the early 1900s among African Americans occurred in imagined communities, through a shared connection to heralded texts (Anderson, 2006). Widespread interaction with common print allowed African Americans to move toward a more nuanced cultural literacy. This national African American literary culture was fundamentally shaped during the Harlem Renaissance through literary magazines and anthologies. Studying the most thriving literary magazines of the time, alongside the emergence of African American literature anthologies, provides insight to how African American literacy development prospered during the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Literary Magazines**

African American literary magazines of the early twentieth century were predominantly “race periodicals, involved first in political and social occurrences and then in black literature” (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, p. 1). Magazines such as *Colored American Magazine*, *Horizon*, and *Voice of the Negro* were initiators of a new African American literary aesthetic (Johnson & Johnson, 1979). Yet, these magazines were guided by editorial decisions that decisively differed in political and social agenda.

One of the more politically outspoken African Americans of the early 1900s was W.E.B. DuBois. To amplify his political and social positions to the masses, he founded *Moon Illustrated Weekly* and later, *Horizon*. DuBois did not shy away from controversy, attacking the political climate of the day through his own editorials as well as through the works of other artists he chose to publish. Johnson and Johnson (1979) suggest that DuBois “wrote boldly, in a way that would shock readers into attention” (p. 26). DuBois utilized his platform as editor to

communicate directly with his readers, often through his own poetry. For DuBois, literature and African American political life were inherently fused together.

Many other African American literary leaders of the time agreed with DuBois in the political potential of African American literature: “The editors and major contributors generally saw literature as propaganda. They disagreed, however, over the type of propaganda” (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, p. 29). Among DuBois’s greatest intellectual adversaries was Charles S. Johnson, who starkly disagreed with DuBois’s position that art was propaganda. At their height, each man—DuBois and Johnson—served as editors of *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, respectively. Their editorial (and political) choices shaped the literacy development of generations of African Americans. They ushered in a new age of literary appreciation and participation, which expanded not only African Americans’ literacy engagement, but bolstered their political activism, too. What follows is a closer examination into the methods and philosophies each of these intellectuals and activists carried out in order to stimulate literacy development among African Americans.

### ***The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races***

In 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) formed. This civil rights organization sought justice in all facets of African American life. One of the organization’s prominent leaders was intellectual, activist, and author, W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois quickly recognized that to spread the mission and message of the NAACP widely would best be facilitated through print. Thus, in 1910 he created *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* magazine. Though born out of the NAACP, DuBois made the magazine a medium through which to assert his personal ideology and opinions regarding the advancement of the race. Johnson and Johnson (1979) write, “By expressing the opinions of a most articulate and

persuasive editor, *Crisis* reached an audience larger than that approximated by any preceding black journal” (p. 34). Circulation of the magazine peaked in 1919, when about 95,000 copies were issued (Johnson & Johnson, 1979).

Quite often work written by DuBois appeared on the pages of the magazine, both those of literary nature as well as his personal musings, observations, interests, and at times, his annoyances. Johnson and Johnson (1979) declare, “DuBois wrote as a propagandist, so convinced of his own views that he penned exceedingly explicit criticisms of individuals and institutions” (p. 38). However, DuBois believed African American life should be depicted honestly through literature, for better or worse, and did not support the publication of only favorable images of African American life (Johnson & Johnson, 1979). He deliberately chose works to publish that were provocative and thought provoking for an African American audience. Some of the pieces published in the magazine’s first year included: “Colored High Schools,” “Women’s Clubs,” “The Colored College Athlete,” and “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Personal Knowledge of the Negro Character” (Rudwick, 1958, p. 214). There were recurring sections of the magazine dedicated to opinions, current events specifically affecting African Americans, NAACP addresses and reports, reading lists, and biographical sketches of noteworthy African Americans (Rudwick, 1958). *Crisis* addressed nearly every aspect of African American life. Even the harsh realities.

In the March 1911 issue of *Crisis*, a recurring section titled “The Burden” outlines grim statistics of “Colored Men Lynched without Trial” from the years 1885 up to 1910 (a total of 2,458 men) (p. 28). Later in this section, in a piece titled “Concerning Parks,” the author decries the injustice in the fact that throughout the south, African Americans are denied access to public parks. The subsequent piece is titled “What is ‘Undue Discrimination?’” and tells of a recent

incident on a Pullman car in Oklahoma where an African American who purchased a ticket was forcibly removed from the car and taken to jail (p. 28). By addressing injustice bluntly and directly, *Crisis* magazine created an informed and inspired readership. Those who read the magazine read of events and news pertinent to their lives. In the June 1911 issue, another one of DuBois's recurrent sections, "Along the Colored Line," includes subsections titled, "Political," "Education," "Economic," "Social Uplift," "The Church," "Legal," "Crime," and "Africa" (pp. 49-53). During this time, to be a reader was to be an informed and engaged citizen. This engaged citizenship begot racial pride and sowed the seeds of social justice.

To maintain and grow his readership, DuBois knew he needed to broaden African Americans' interest in social justice issues beyond the pages of *Crisis*. In the March 1912 issue of the periodical, an advertisement promotes DuBois's vision for a well-informed and civically engaged readership. With the headline question reading, "Are you interested in the Negro problem or a part of it?" this advertisement promotes a special where with the commitment of a year's subscription to the magazine, readers also receive a set of "books on the Negro problem" (p. 217). These books include *The Souls of Black Folk* by DuBois, *History of the Negro* by Washington, *Up from Slavery* by Washington, *Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, *Race Adjustment* by Miller, *Following the Color Line* by Baker, *Aftermath of Slavery* by Sinclair, and *Half a Man* by Ovington, among others. These texts all placed the African American's position in American society at the center of their work. Battling injustice and endorsing racial uplift began with understanding the history of their race and acknowledging their current condition in America. Resistance began with knowledge and DuBois sought to equip his readers with texts and information that would serve not only as armor, but as weapons.

DuBois edited *Crisis* as an overt political agent. He understood the inextricable link between the literate lives of African Americans and the advancement of the race nationally. He aimed to cultivate a racial consciousness not just through the development of critical readers, but also critical writers. To initiate this, *Crisis* held literary contests open to the public. Chosen pieces would be published in the magazine and the respective authors would receive prize money for their work. Christian (2016) notes that the structure and guidelines of these contests

Appealed to readers as emergent writers and influenced how submissions were crafted as much as how those texts were to be read. These contests encouraged the alignment of accepted standards of craft with somewhat more malleable conventions of racial representation. They also courted and then documented African American creativity as an element of America's modernity. (pp. 42-43)

These contests were essential in inciting racial pride and placing literacy at the heart of social change. Other periodicals held similar contests; however, DuBois's philosophy toward these contests was unique. He believed that the winners of the contests should produce works directly designed for an African American audience—influencing whites was not a main priority (Austin, 1988). To be published in a periodical that up to that point had printed works by the likes of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Walter White, and Jessie Fauset was significant. Many budding African American writers saw these contests as an established pathway to publication. The entries were numerous. DuBois's mission of "building a group literature through amassing high-quality writing" was achieved through a dual focus on the submissions' racial representation and mastery of craft (Christian, 2016, p. 46). To guide aspiring writers, DuBois published articles on the craft of writing leading up to the contest submission deadline (Austin, 1988). Following the announcement of the contest winners, DuBois published judges'

comments. Christian (2016) claims, “Printing winning entries alongside representative comments from contest judges could inspire engaged readers to employ the criteria specified by the judges in their individual and collective reading” (p. 62). Comments were critical of contestants’ writing, but also offered praise and encouragement. By including more than just the winning pieces in *Crisis*, DuBois acted as a mentor for African Americans in their literacy development. To support high-quality writing, he provided structure, guidelines, examples, and feedback. He exploited the codependency of reading and writing by turning his magazine’s readers into its authors. This shift in ownership—from consumer of text to producer of it—had inspiring effects. It fell in line with the New Negro Movement and the swell of racial pride during the Harlem Renaissance. DuBois effectively empowered his readership to become active participants in not only the artistic explosion of the Harlem Renaissance, but also the sociopolitical life of African Americans. Through the unapologetically political community DuBois created with *Crisis*, African Americans stepped into a new age of racial representation that was grounded in literary activity.

### ***Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life***

Contrasting DuBois’s fiery and blunt political voice was the leadership of activist Charles S. Johnson. His editorial style “was an example of deliberate and rational analysis, usually objective, often subtle, generally complex and balanced in judgement” (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, p. 50). While softer and more measured in his approach to ensuring equality for African Americans, he was arguably just as influential—if not more so—than DuBois in shaping a civically engaged and highly literate African American population. Johnson served as a researcher for the National Urban League (NUL) in New York City. As an extension of his efforts on behalf of the NUL, in 1923 he created a periodical, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro*

*Life*, which much like DuBois's *Crisis*, focused on developing an informed and culturally conscious African American readership.

While *Opportunity* was founded in a similar racial vein as *Crisis*, Johnson took a different philosophical approach to his periodical than DuBois. Johnson also sought to provide a stage for the development of African American readers and writers. However, in contrast to DuBois, Johnson hoped the African American literature published in his periodical would alter attitudes of whites (Austin, 1988). Johnson considered literacy a bridge between races. As such, publications were selected heavily on criteria of craft. Racial representation was important as well, but high-quality writing that cut across racial lines pervaded the pages. In the April 1927 issue of *Opportunity*, Johnson reflects on the impact of poet James Weldon Johnson, whose work frequently appeared in the periodical: "After him, a new literary generation begins, giving us poetry that is racial in substance and context, but with the universal note and using consciously the full heritage of the English poetry" (p. 109). This praise falls within a section of the publication titled, "The New Negro as Revealed in His Poetry." Johnson guides the reader through what can with a modern lens be considered the early days of an African American poetry canon. Works from poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay appear. Johnson concludes this section by stating, "I have tried to approach it without any sense of race conflict. I have found that I could read these poems with the same disregard of the fact that they were written by a Negro as I can *The Three Musketeers*" (p. 111). Johnson continually promoted African American writing by not just appealing to the racial representation of the content, but also the elevation of the craft. He sought to imbue his readership with an appreciation for the characteristics of good writing. Like DuBois, Johnson acted as a mentor within the pages of *Opportunity*, constantly modeling how to critically read.

Johnson promoted high-quality literature of interest to African Americans in a recurring section titled “Our Book Shelf.” Between the January to March 1928 issues of *Opportunity*, some of the selected texts include *Portraits in Color* by Ovington; *Charcoal and Chalk* by McCormick; *Thomas Paine, Prophet and Martyr of Democracy* by Best; *Porto Rico* by Mixer; *Religious Folk Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton* edited by Dett; *Occupied Haiti* edited by Balch; *Dwellers in the Jungle* by Casserly; and *Southern Exposure* by Wilson. Notably, some of the works included in “Our Book Shelf” were not written by African Americans nor did they feature content of African American life directly. In this respect, Johnson’s curation of his book shelf endeavored to expand African Americans’ exposure to great writing, while also pushing his readers to consider their sociopolitical station through a different perspective. Mingling works by African Americans with works by non-African American writers gave readers options, all of which contributed to an enlarged individual and cultural literacy. Johnson wrote a personal review of each of the pieces he included in his book shelf. Again, here Johnson served as a mentor for his readers and provided insight and direction as to why he deemed certain works worthy of the book shelf and what about the works would appeal to his readers.

To extend his lessons on literary criticism in the *Opportunity*, as well as lend greater credibility and intrigue to the periodical, Johnson invited accomplished African American writers to contribute regular columns. Countee Cullen was one such writer whose column was titled “The Dark Tower.” In his column, Cullen critically reviews current poetry, literature, plays, musicals, songs, and films. In displaying a critical eye for various elements of craft, combined with his personal observations, Cullen advises readers in how to critically engage in literacy. A June 1928 issue of *Opportunity* featured Cullen’s column, reviewing Leslie Pinckney Hill’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture*. Cullen writes,

Mr. Hill has attempted the grand manner of the great dramatic poets, and if here and there passages are reminiscent, they have the saving grace of calling up the masters. There are echoes in the voodoo scenes, which are admirably done in both structure and atmosphere, of the weird sisters of Macbeth, and though the mind reverts to the pale Prince of Denmark while reading Toussaint's strong soliloquy, this black chieftain's storm and stress constitute one of the finest pieces of sober writing yet done by one of our poets. (p. 179)

Through his column, Cullen worked to refine the literary palate of the New Negro. As Christian (2016) notes, Cullen "modeled and argued reading practices that were culturally informed and rigorous but flexible" (p. 18). Cullen typically ended his column with a list of the month's most popular books at the Harlem Branch Library. Cullen was not alone in this literacy mentorship.

Active Harlem Renaissance writer Gwendolyn B. Bennett also composed a regular column in *Opportunity*, called "The Ebony Flute." Like Cullen, she provides general overviews of artistic works, situates the works culturally and in broader contexts, provides insight on craft, and offers personal reactions (Christian, 2016). Contributors to *Opportunity* such as Cullen and Bennett fostered the literacy development of an increasingly racially affirmed readership. Their modeling on how to read and engage critically with text was essential in the growth of both individual literacy and a group literature. Johnson and contributing editors to *Opportunity* imparted their literary opinions and expertise in hopes of raising African Americans' critical consciousness while reading and writing. To further facilitate his readers' critical engagement with the texts published in *Opportunity*, Johnson welcomed reader responses from the public. These responses were typically addressed directly to Johnson. He personally replied to as many as possible, occasionally publishing a particularly thoughtful and reflective composition in the

periodical. Reader responses suggested an increased empowerment, engagement, and racial pride among *Opportunity*'s African American readership. In this way, reader responses fell in line with Johnson's goal of creating a democratic literary sphere that fostered racial uplift and interracial cooperation (Christian, 2016). For readers of *Opportunity*, being a critical reader also meant acting as an engaged writer. To do both effectively required cultural competence. This cultural awareness could be gleaned from the assorted current events Johnson confronted in *Opportunity*.

In addition to publishing literature and poetry of the day, *Opportunity* also featured current events, editorials, informational notes, National Urban League updates, and opinion pieces. The June 1927 issue includes pieces titled "Is the Negro Family a Unique Sociological Unit?," by Frazier (p.165); "The Negro Brotherhood of Sevilla," by Schomburg (p.162); "Social Service Needs of the South," by Thomas (p. 173); as well as "The Conference Note Book," which includes parts of papers read at the 1927 National Urban League Conference (p.175). Yet, *Opportunity* was decidedly less politically charged than DuBois's *Crisis*. Johnson's intention to use literacy as a means to elevate the artistic palate of the race and create a highly intelligent, well-rounded African American population was evident in his curation of *Opportunity*.

### **Anthologies**

Starting in the 1920s the anthology began to grow into the Harlem Renaissance's most influential book genre (Christian, 2016). The compilation of poems, essays, fictions, and other writings became a physical symbol of the blossoming African American literary tradition. According to Christian (2016), "Many creative writers and social critics understood the literature that the period's anthologies showcased as investment in efforts to remake American society so that African Americans could enter into it and be a part of it more fully" (pp. 91-92). Anthologies of the early 1900s worked to disrupt the traditional American literary canon. By

celebrating the works of accomplished and rising African American authors and poets, anthologies began to renegotiate the genre of American literature. Making space for African American writers in the national literature began with establishing an African American literary canon and developing a critical readership. Editors acknowledged and acted on the pedagogical possibilities that came with the curation of an anthology. They sought to frame literature in a way to make it accessible and enjoyable for their African American readers. The weight of an emerging literary tradition was not lost on the editors; they made sure to instruct their readers on the cultural significance of both the texts included in the anthology and the reader's responsibility to those texts. As Christian (2016) points out, "Anthologies reflected African Americans' increasing literacy and gestured toward the viability of their social and cultural history" (p. 21). This section explores three landmark anthologies and the ways in which their editor(s) promoted critical engagement with their respective anthologies. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, *The New Negro*, and *Readings from Negro Authors* demonstrate the powerful effects anthologies had on African American literacy development during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

### ***The Book of American Negro Poetry***

In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), editor James Weldon Johnson bluntly justifies his curation: "The public, generally speaking, does not know that there are American Negro poets." Johnson tersely defended the need for such an anthology, but he had greater aims than facilitating increased public exposure to African American poetry. Johnson used his platform as editor to model for his readers how to critically engage with poems. In the preface Johnson instructs his readers on reading methods.

To promote initial interest, Johnson lures his readers into the volume through an appeal to African Americans' musical roots. He opens by drawing on the history of Ragtime. Johnson includes a few lines from the song "Po' Boy" and follows by instructing, "these lines are crude, but they contain something of real poetry, of that elusive thing which nobody can define and that you can only tell it is there when you feel it." Understanding that his audience would probably be unfamiliar with poetry, Johnson found an entry point for his readers that bridged their prior cultural knowledge with a new artistic form. While poetry in practice was not novel for many of Johnson's African American readers, the formal reading and analysis of "standard poetry" could have been new. Johnson respected the cultural traditions African Americans brought to poetry and sought to expand their appreciation of the art form through critical reading methods.

Johnson continues his reading methods instruction by calling on the works of early African American poet, Phyllis Wheatley. Johnson carries out a comparative analysis between select pieces from Wheatley placed alongside pieces by Anne Bradstreet, a white poet active around the same time as Wheatley. By doing so, Johnson "implicitly modeled comparative analysis as an instructive strategy for reading the artistry of racial representation" (Christian, 2016, p. 24). He continues his in-depth analysis of Wheatley's work, interspersing short lines of her poetry with his own commentary. Between Wheatley quotations, Johnson reviews,

One looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land. In two poems she refers definitely to Africa as her home, but in each instance there seems to be under the sentiment of the lines a feeling of almost smug contentment at her own escape therefrom.

Johnson shows his readers how to critically evaluate a poem: both in form and content. He acknowledges the shortcomings of early African American poets' technique. But to set the

standard for the genre going forward, Johnson points to Paul Laurence Dunbar as the poetic pillar of excellence to which the race should look. Tracing the evolution of African American poetry, Johnson rounds out the preface by including small critiques of the poets he includes in the anthology and provides a brief rationale for his editorial decisions. What made Johnson's anthology unique was that it decidedly combated historical exclusion of African American poetry and it gave readers a culturally significant entryway into the act of reading poetry. By modeling reading methods and criticism, Johnson equipped his readers with basic information and skills to use in their own close reading of the poetry included in the anthology.

### ***The New Negro: An Interpretation***

There are few more prominent leaders of the Harlem Renaissance than Alain Locke. Responsible for the term *New Negro Movement*, Locke was central in the philosophical shift among African Americans during the early 1900s. His deep considerations of group identity and cultural legitimation placed him as a forefather of the African American literary expansion of the Harlem Renaissance (Harris & Molesworth, 2008). Locke's seminal gift to the Harlem Renaissance was *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925)—an anthology of fiction, essays, drama and poetry by African American artists. This powerful text is widely considered the canonical text of the Harlem Renaissance. Christian (2016) asserts that *The New Negro* “introduced writers as artists and strategically infused their perspectives into explicit and implicit models for reading African American literature and culture” (pp. 70-71).

Like James Weldon Johnson, Locke contributed his own writing to help situate his readers within the context of the anthology. Locke composed the foreword and four essays. Foremost among these is Locke's most esteemed essay, “The New Negro.” A philosopher by training, Locke's writings present great depth on the African American condition, distinguishing

between the “Old Negro” and “New Negro.” He argues for his unique vision of racial uplift, pushing for a transformation of African American life. Locke’s writings to open the anthology frame the reader’s course. Christian (2016) suggests that “Locke introduced, guided, persuaded, nurtured, and cultivated his readers. One read and could not help but become a version of Locke’s New Negro reader” (p. 76). To become one of Locke’s “New Negro readers” meant engaging with the most renowned and up-and-coming African American writers of the day: Braithwaite, Cullen, DuBois, Burghardt, Fauset, Hughes, Kellogg, McKay, Moton, and White, among others. Christian (2016) notes, “Featured writers embodied not simply the voices and perspectives of Africa America but the most innovative and potentially transformative of those voices and perspectives” (p. 76). Locke curated his anthology to include those writers whose work served as racially representative and politically significant, in addition to technically masterful. Collecting these works together literally and symbolically supported the literacy development of African Americans. To take pride in one’s culture and the art of that culture was at the core of the New Negro Movement. This canonical text reached out to its African American readers and provided heightened awareness and racial affirmation through literature. Possibly more than any other text, Locke’s *The New Negro* firmly established an African American literary tradition.

### ***Readings from Negro Authors***

Most of the African American anthologies created during the Harlem Renaissance were directed toward a reading public engaging in critical literacy outside of formal education institutions. In 1931, college professors Otelia Cromwell, Lorenzo D. Turner, and Eva B. Dykes published a collection of African American literature aimed specifically at students, for use in educational institutions. *Readings from Negro Authors for Schools and Colleges with a*

*Bibliography of Negro Literature* (1931) was one of the earliest textbooks featuring African American literature. In a 1932 review in *The Journal of Negro History*, Strong commented on *Readings from Negro Authors*:

No one eager to understand American literature can afford to neglect this vital part. For that is not education which subordinates the quest for truth to the service of existing prejudice. It is high time that young America should begin this serious study. And here is an uncommonly opportune guide that shows how the task should be undertaken. (p. 384)

The editors of *Readings from Negro Authors* embarked on one of the earliest quests to bring African American literature into the classroom. Instilling cultural pride in young African American students and strengthening their sense of racial heritage was essential to both students' literacy and personal development.

The editors were more explicit in their pedagogical approach to crafting their anthology than previous anthology editors. In their "Suggested Study" section, they pose thought provoking questions, offer up critical and creative assignments, and include a list of parallel readings (Strong, 1932). The editors also include introductory essays that serve as "revealing signposts by means of which the student is shown how to realize the experience, to get the point of view, to enjoy the artistry and to set up proper criteria" (Strong, 1932, p. 385). The editors provided instructional frameworks for students in an attempt to enrich their reading experiences. They encouraged readers to engage in comparative analysis between traditional canonical texts and those of the New Negro Movement and in doing so, the editors worked to situate the New Negro writer as a legitimate subject for nuanced literary instruction (Christian, 2016). The editors of *Readings from Negro Authors* created a text to be used in the formal education of African American students and pointed it directly toward the cultural experiences of the students. They

understood that literature of high craftsmanship and literature of cultural significance were not mutually exclusive, and thus the works of esteemed African American writers made for excellent educational resources for African American students.

## CONCLUSION

The heart of this study deals with the cultural practices of students within the classroom. These cultural practices have long legacies, reaching deep into the history books. The question is whether teachers have the courage, compassion, and competence to utilize these cultural practices as legitimate in-school assets. Lee (2017) offers up a fitting query for educators today:

For students who are members of communities that are politically marginalized, what functions can attention to historically intergenerational cultural practices (often associated with ethnicity) serve in terms of supporting positive identities, resilience, and critical analyses of institutional policies and practices that serve as sources of disenfranchisement? (p. 269)

Continuing on with Eurocentric approaches that characterize much of what counts as literacy instruction in today's schools will continue to leave large segments of students, or as Lee calls politically marginalized students, behind. Bomer (2017) comments, "There is an inescapable agenda in traditional English Language Arts to replace students' language patterns, aesthetic tastes, literacy practices, and composing practices with those of the dominant culture" (p. 12). This colonizing agenda has clearly been academically deleterious for minority students, African American students in particular (Bomer, 2017, p. 12). Thus, new, and in the case of this paper, historical, perspectives are needed to readjust educators' orientation to teaching literacy to African American students. It is time for educators to do the challenging and rewarding work of authentically realigning philosophies, practices, and outcomes surrounding literacy to align more closely with culturally sustaining pedagogy.

I began this study by outlining the modern-day achievement discrepancies between African American students and their white peers. I then nuanced the discussion by looking

beyond these statistics and digging deeper into root causes of the problem, namely the neglect of culture in much of curriculum and instruction. Not content with the status quo, I provided a framework for culturally sustaining pedagogy that can be carried out by educators, English teachers specifically, by deliberately enacting instructional practices and making curricular decisions that position students' cultural practices and knowledge as the driving forces of the learning process. Following this theoretical grounding, I examined African American literary societies of the 1800s. I continued to chart African American literacy development up to the Harlem Renaissance, when the idea of the New Negro exploded in African American literary pursuits, particularly via literary magazines and literary anthologies.

To bring this study full circle and conclude my argument, I will synthesize the aforementioned historically successful sites and means of African American literacy development with modern conceptions of culturally sustaining pedagogy. For teachers today, there is much to be learned from history. It is naive to think these historical sites of literacy development can be identically replicated in today's classrooms—the contexts are simply too drastically different. Yet, it is clear that certain practices and approaches to teaching and learning can and should be adopted from these historical sites. By situating historical methods of African American literacy development within a culturally sustaining pedagogy framework, culturally sustaining pedagogy bears a modern-day practicality embedded in cultural traditions.

Bomer (2017) endorses a culturally sustaining pedagogy because of the way it allows students to “perpetuate their existing literacy practices, sustain their heritage languages, even as they expand into new domains and projects to advance their lives” (p. 12). Students come to the classroom with literacies. They are more often than not culturally situated, which is why many teachers delegitimize them. Many times this occurs due to the differences between teachers' and

students' cultural practices. But providing space for students to develop these culturally situated literacies is vital. Bomer (2017) provides five foundational culturally sustaining practices, listed below. I will expand on each of his points to show how historical sites of African American literacy development manifested these tenets to positive effect.

1. **“Whole-class texts: purposeful about advancing disadvantaged groups”** (p. 13).

African American literary societies held as a central aim the establishment of a literary tradition and textual lineage among its members. Few African Americans in the nineteenth century had exposure to works of other African Americans. Thus, literary societies deliberately positioned African American writers and their works foremost. By doing so, these literary societies preserved various texts that often went ignored, such as biographies, diaries, songs, poems, sermons, and essays, among others. In elevating the literary products of the race, African American literary societies fostered members' identity construction. Flowing from this identity construction was personal power that in turn led to activism and a desire to combat racial stereotypes. Later on during the Harlem Renaissance, African American editors and authors challenged the hierarchy of literature by placing African American works on equal footing as classic works of the mainstream canon. These individuals challenged the assumed objective greatness of classic works and encouraged African Americans to produce their own great texts, in a culturally specific manner.

Teachers today can employ similar tactics to carry out culturally sustaining pedagogy. To begin, teachers must deliberately include texts written by and about people from diverse backgrounds. The subsequent study of these works can include strategies such as comparative analysis, where multiple texts are held up against each other to gain a greater appreciation for the individual qualities of each. This can be especially impactful when texts written by authors of

dissimilar backgrounds and perspectives are commenting on the same topic. In studying these works side-by-side, students can gain a greater appreciation for cultural difference. Another strategy is to incorporate literature circles or whole-class Socratic seminars. Allowing students to discuss, critique, and question aloud a multicultural text can potentially bring heightened awareness to disadvantaged groups, as represented in the text. For whole-class texts, an open dialogue is imperative.

2. **“Independent reading: explicit encouragement to seek out texts that represent students’ own groups and language practices, as well as those of different groups”** (p. 13).

Literary societies acted as lending libraries, providing members with texts to consume independently. Newspapers circulated frequently among members, giving individuals updates on current events affecting their lives. Literary societies attracted and maintained their membership through the study of empowering texts: texts by, about, and for an African American reader. Literary societies did not exclusively read works by African Americans; they also studied classic works and engaged in comparative analysis between texts. In the Harlem Renaissance, DuBois and Johnson both included a version of an African American reading list in their literary magazines. These reading lists celebrated the diverse texts African American authors created and challenged readers to critically engage with texts that would push them to consider the political, social, economic, and racial dimensions of their lives. These recommended texts dealt with the good and bad sides of African American life. Works by non-African American authors were also included in these reading lists, especially in the case of Johnson, who valued African Americans’ holistic literary development. In addition, anthologies published during this time began forging a highly esteemed African American literary canon.

In classrooms today, teachers can provide students with a list of multicultural literature from which to choose for independent reading. Students have autonomy in selecting texts that they find meaningful and interesting. It is important, however, that teachers provide students texts that act as mirrors to reflect their own culture, experiences, and perspectives, but also as windows into others' culture, experiences, and perspectives (Galda, 1998). For independent reading, reader response can be a powerful strategy. As Glazier and Seo (2005) comment,

Reader response encourages students to become aware of what they bring to texts as readers; it has the potential to help them recognize the specificity of their own cultural backgrounds and strive to understand the cultural backgrounds of others. Often students read and respond to texts with an eye toward the first goal or toward the second, but not toward both. However, multicultural literature is capable of doing both simultaneously, promoting intercultural and intracultural understanding. (p. 689)

3. **“Study of strategies for literate practices for advocacy and uplift of the community”** (p. 13).

In literary societies, literacy was a communal activity. Members who obtained literacy passed it along and helped other members acquire reading skills. To aid those who were not able to read, texts were frequently read aloud. Notably, in literary societies, skill instruction was never a decontextualized act. All literacy development had utility. Meaning, literacy was considered a tool for racial uplift, so literacy activities dealt with issues, questions, texts, and skills that were immediately practical and valuable to members' lives and to their communities. To have literacy was to help your community. Literary societies, along with literary magazines and anthologies sought to create a politically and socially informed body of African Americans. Central to achieving this was the constant study of current events. From newspapers to literary magazines, African Americans made sure to stay abreast of sociopolitical developments that could affect

their lives and communities. In studying these issues, African Americans were able to articulate injustice and oppression, and use literacy as their means of resistance.

Teachers carrying out a culturally sustaining pedagogy in today's classrooms would do well to echo history by situating literacy instruction in current events in which students have vested interests. The common student complaint of "When am I going to use this in real life?" has no place in a culturally sustaining pedagogy, for literacy instruction is constantly grounded in students' lived realities. In our age of social media, students have instantaneous access to sociopolitical developments locally and globally. To capitalize on this, teachers can position literacy as a tool for social transformation and impact. Real-world problem solving inevitably requires literacy in its various capacities. Encouraging students to take up projects of interest to them and providing platforms to create original solutions to these issues and problems through twenty-first century research, analytical reading, and multimodal writing/communication is at the heart of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

4. **"Focus on community and audience as source of writing agendas, use of most effective languages and varieties of English for those audiences"** (p. 13).

Most writing in literary societies and literary magazines occurred for public purposes. In literary societies, members served as audience and critics for personal writing. Peer evaluation was a common practice in literary societies. The best pieces—as determined by the group—would be published in the society's publication or even in a regional or national publication. For these individuals, the content of a publication-worthy piece dealt with issues and topics of prime importance to other African Americans. These works had to be interesting to fellow African Americans, or they would not be published. Also, literary society women often wrote club papers and would travel to neighboring literary societies, or even a national convention, to share their work. Later on, the literary contests held by literary magazines provided a public audience for

prospective writers. Publishing the judges' comments alongside the selected pieces gave guidance to their African American readership as to best practices and effective writing strategies. These literary magazines accepted and sometimes published reader responses. Again, the impetus for writing was for a specific public purpose. Writing was not just an isolated, private venture. During this time, writing was a public act that intended to impact a wide audience through relevant content.

Carrying these tenets into the modern classroom steeped in culturally sustaining pedagogy, teachers can create sites of publication for students. For instance, to capitalize on students' proclivity toward electronic communication, teachers can establish a class blog where student work can be shared and commented on. Digital portfolios can also give students a means of publication that they can share with classmates, family, and their broader community. In addition, this can also serve as an assessment tool for teachers to track improvement in writing. There should be flexibility in these blogs and portfolios, as culturally sustaining pedagogy endorses the use of vernacular. It is important to give students space to communicate in these digital platforms as they authentically would outside of school. Obviously, these platforms should be monitored for inappropriate contributions, but to engage students fully in the activity, teachers should allow for hybridity in communication. Further, teachers can endorse multimodal performativity in all academic ventures in the classroom. Keeping audience as a central focus for all literacy activity will require students to employ numerous modes of communication to effectively convey meaning.

5. **“Analysis of language as an instance of power; valuing of heritage language and flexibility of language practices”** (p. 13).

Literary societies served as arenas for leaders to hone their oration skills. Debate was also popular in literary societies and the ability to articulate complex ideas was valued. For African

Americans, literacy and oration were traditionally interconnected. Lyricism, poetry, song, prayer, and hymns were foundational oral performances that unified. Performing vernacular literacy was an act of solidarity and empowerment. Moving into the Harlem Renaissance, editors such as DuBois provided guidance on the craft of writing. Exemplars of language were upheld and promoted in literary magazines. Charles S. Johnson modeled for his readers how to critically read with an eye toward language choices. James Weldon Johnson bridged his audience into the study of poetry by opening his anthology with an analysis of ragtime song lyrics that reflected the vernacular many of the readers used day to day. Both literary societies and editors and authors of the Harlem Renaissance understood the power of literature and the power of language in enacting change.

Teachers enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy today can also seek to draw upon students' vernacular usage in literacy. Teachers can incorporate texts that use the vernacular, like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, which are two examples of canonical texts that can be used to honor and study African American Language (AAL). Paris and Kirkland (2010) suggest, "Understanding the features of AAL, from grammar to phonology to larger rhetorical traditions of signifying and toasting, is crucial to comprehending the worlds and themes of Black American experience expressed through the books" (p. 190). Extending the study (and use) of vernacular beyond canonical works, teachers can have students engage in multimodal performances that welcome vernacular. Paris and Kirkland (2011) propose,

Their [students'] text messages, Twitter exchanges, rap lyrics, and spoken-word pieces, then, become texts to study alongside those of authors in discussions of the history of Englishes, historic oppression and segregation, and historic and continuing achievement

through the voicing of AAL, other Englishes and languages, and the cultural traditions of youth and their communities. (p. 191)

Far from a static and standard conception of language, by positioning vernacular literacy as a central site of legitimate study, teachers open up a “critical dialogue about why language varies and how literacy happens in the contemporary world” (Paris & Kirkland, 2011, p. 191). This also opens up new hybrid spaces for student writing in the classroom.

My research into historical African American literacy development revealed an era wherein literacy and power (political, racial, economic, social, and otherwise) were coupled together in high esteem. To have one was to have the other. To hold a close and flourishing relationship to literacy was of immense personal and communal value. Morrell (2005) challenges educators today to take an activist stance in their literacy pedagogy. He questions, “How seriously do we take our beliefs about the role of literacy education in promoting individual and social transformation?” (p. 319). If literary societies and the Harlem Renaissance teach us anything, it is that literacy has a transformative power that when properly leveraged, can prove life changing. But educators must take action. Bomer (2017) implores, “Culturally sustaining pedagogies require that we hold onto hope, that we believe that change is coming, that it’s on its way right now, and needs our action” (p. 15). This is a call to action for English teachers. Literacy was once thriving, collaborative, passionate, and imperative for social justice among African Americans. Through a culturally sustaining pedagogy, it can be once again.

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