

THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICES WITHIN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY SOCIETIES

By Gholnecsar E. Muhammad

In an address before the American Moral Reform Society on August 17, 1837, James Forten, an African American writer, abolitionist, and businessman, eloquently charged a group of his fellow brethren and advocated for the development of literary institutions to improve the intellect and morality among African American people. He asserted:

I conceive, our Literary Institutions to have the power of doing. It seems to me, then, that the main object is to accomplish an intellectual and moral reformation. And I know of but few better ways to effect [sic] this than by reading, by examining, by close comparisons and thorough investigations, by exercising the great faculty of thinking; for, if a man can be brought to think, he soon discovers that his highest enjoyment consists in the improvement of the mind; it is this that will give him rich ideas, and teach him, also, that his limbs were never made to wear the chains of servitude; he will see too that equal rights were intended for all.¹

I uncovered this address while sifting through printed archives of African American literary societies of the 1800s. The sifting began with an interest to examine if and how these literary institutions cultivated the literacy development of African Americans throughout the nineteenth century. As a former secondary English language arts and history teacher, I understand the significance of blending meaningful reading and writing experiences while teaching history. As I learned more about these literary institutions that James Forten referred to and African American literacy development, I began to make connections to the storied lives and pursuits of the past and how history could be used to improve the quality of reading and writing experiences for middle and high school students.

Throughout the 1800s, a central objective among African Americans in the North was to improve and elevate the condition of people of African descent through a literary means. As illustrated in the excerpt from James Forten's address, the ways in which African Americans set out to counter the devastating conditions they endured during a time of racism and oppression was through reading and discussing literary texts. As part of a broader struggle to counter multiple attacks of oppression, they used their minds and their pens as weapons to battle injustice. Books

and other texts (e.g., pamphlets, government documents, newspapers) became ammunition to fuel and elevate their lives. They knew that if they could work toward cultivating their minds and morals through acts of literacy, they would be equipped to face and alter the nation's harshest realities and countless attacks of terror placed upon African American people. Reading and writing were more than a set of skills for African Americans to possess; they were pathways to define their lives and advocate for civil rights. To this end, African Americans developed literary institutions, specifically *literary societies*, which were essentially collaborative spaces used to construct knowledge and engage each other to become literate.

African American literary societies were also called reading rooms, lyceums, and debating societies. These were more than just associations or spaces to discuss literature; they had wider goals of benefiting the conditions of African Americans and the wider society. These societies were large and small and were both gender-specific and unisex. The earlier societies were for men only. African American women subsequently created their own literary societies. Within these groups, African Americans of different ages would gather around texts they identified as meaningful and significant to encourage and improve reading, writing, and speaking skills, share knowledge, promote ideas and cultivate a scholarly and literate way of life.² Members in these societies met regularly in basements of churches, buildings with classrooms, libraries, private homes, and auditoriums for events, such as public addresses or debates that drew large crowds.³ They also paid membership dues regularly, which supported texts to furnish libraries and other expenses. Like most organizations, they wrote and published preambles and constitutions, which outlined the rules and regulations that were expected from its members.

African American literary societies began in urban "free" cities such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York City, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington DC in the mid-nineteenth century. At this time, there were approximately 319,599 "free" Black people living in the United States⁴ yet although they were openly free, they were frequently subject to hostility, abuse, and had a number of restrictions placed upon them imbued with discrimination.⁵ The Reading Room Society for Men of Colour formed in Philadelphia on May 28, 1828 was one of the first societies. William Whipper, a businessman and leader of several other institutions, served as the "guiding spirit" of this group and was instrumental in its formation. Other societies with similar objectives quickly followed the installment of the Reading Room Society. Among them were the New York African Clarkson Society in 1829, the New York Philomathean Society in 1830, the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons in 1833,

the Rush Library and Debating Society in 1836, the Young Men's Literary and Moral Reform Society of Pittsburgh and Vicinity in 1837, the Young Men's Literary Society in Boston in 1845, and the Banneker Institute of the City of Philadelphia in 1854. Among the African American women literary societies were the Female Literary Society formed in 1831, Ladies Literary Society formed in 1834, and Ladies Literary and Dorcas Society formed in 1833.⁶

These societies often had dual functions. Developing reading, writing, and speaking skills was at the core of experiences for members of the societies. These experiences led members to enjoy literature. Elocution gave them a platform to project their voices to public audiences. Reading and writing were also viewed as a social practice in the societies. In this view, the focus was placed on reading and writing the world. Reading and writing as a social practice is currently described as critical literacy, that is, literacy to understand the self within local and broader contexts to inform actions and behaviors. This type of *reading* allowed literary society members to make sense of their many and complex identities including their collective Black identity in America, their unique personal identities, as well as their larger global identities and positions in the world. Being able to define one's self empowered African Americans and enabled them to use literacy as tools for self-determination and resiliency. Because of this, literacy was also linked to ideals of security, protection, and liberation.

The central literacy activities within these groups included reading, discussion, debating, and penning and publishing original writings. These activities were all practiced around enabling texts. *Enabling texts* move beyond a solely cognitive focus such as skill and strategy development but also include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus.⁷ These enabling texts offered a variety of subjects to excite their interests, bring joy and pleasure from reading and to stimulate their minds to think and debate about significant issues. The texts read, discussed, debated and written by members included classics from English writers, laws of the land, national and international news, letters, maps, sermons, speeches, poetry, narratives, essays, biographies, broadsides, short stories and texts on literature, science, humanities, and history.

Ultimately, these literacy activities led to a central goal—developing something called, *literary character*. Literary character is the personal and academic characteristics of a person that develop as a result of reading, writing, and speaking. The strength of members' nature and personality was tied to print, texts, and acts of literacy. These acts of literacy became absorbed in the lives of African Americans in literary societies and were certainly

ascribed as their personal and collective “make-up.” Elizabeth McHenry describes the development of literary character as the process of accumulating literary skills, which gave access to “free” African Americans living in the North the means to become exemplary citizens who could participate in civic life of their community.⁸ In the May 16, 1840, edition of the *Colored American* newspaper, a section titled, “Characteristics of the People of Color-No. 3: Literary Character” was published.⁹ This was the third article in a three-part series about character development of African Americans. The first part discussed religious character and the second addressed moral character. In the literary character column, the writer, who signed as “Examiner” defined literary character simply as knowledge gained from literature and the “literary advancement” and improvement of the mind. The writer asserted that literary character can and should be advanced and that no youth or adult should be satisfied with basic proficiency in reading and writing. Literary character has also been defined as being endowed with morality, self-discipline, intellectual curiosity, civic responsibility, and being able to use reason, self-expression, eloquence, and agency¹⁰ through literacy activities. In many ways, acquiring literary character was the ultimate goal and therefore meant that African Americans were able to conquer injustice and learn the skills necessary to protect their existence.



African American literary societies are a rich, yet scarcely documented part of American literary and educational history. However, learning about these spaces can help educators understand literacy development and the practices within these collaborative groups. This could then serve as a useful guide for shaping reading and writing experiences in secondary classrooms. Although we are many decades away from the establishment of the first African American literary societies, there are several distinct lessons on informing classroom instruction. As I conclude, I have provided a table of 10 key aspects of literary societies that can be transferred to contemporary classrooms. In the second column of the table, I have written a typical scenario that I have observed in my experience as an educator. I strongly believe teachers can form groups in classrooms and engage students in similar ways of literary society members. Furthermore, literary character can certainly be a meaningful goal for youth to aspire towards as they engage in literacy acts in schools today.

Table 1: Comparison of Literacy Instruction in Literary Societies and Traditional Classrooms

Aspects of 1800s Literary Societies	Common Scenarios in Classrooms Today
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
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

Notes

1. Dorothy B. Porter, *Early Negro Writings 1760-1837* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1995), p. 238.
2. Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004).
3. Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions*, 120
4. Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1856," *Journal of Negro History* 5 (1936): 555
5. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
6. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1856," 557-58.
7. Alfred Tatum, *Reading for Their Life: Rebuilding the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2009).
8. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, page
9. Examiner, "Character's of the People of Color-No. 3: Literary Character," *Colored American*, May 16, 1840, 1.
10. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 100



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Lesson Plan:

The Literacy Development and Practices Within African American Literary Societies

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Connections to Middle and High School

Adolescence is a period where students are motivated in the classroom when learning is social and offers opportunities for them to make sense of their lives. This lesson blends history and literacy learning and allows students to work in collaborative groups to read, write and share ideas among each other. Students will engage in a piece of writing produced during or within 1800s literary societies and discuss three literary themes. Students will use the themes within writings as platforms and models for their own writing.

Goals

Students will gain knowledge about African American literary societies, analyze the language used in writings produced within these literary groups and write their own piece across the same literary themes.

Objectives

Within collaborative groups, students will read a piece of writing produced in the 1800s. Students will then analyze and discuss the significance of the language used across the following three themes:

1. Using the language in writing to (re)claim authority (using words in writings to recover self-determination and power by asserting one's voice and ideals)
2. Using language in writing to self-define (resolving, discussing, and building selfhood, individuality, and community within writings)
3. Using language to advocate for or elevate one's community (improving and elevating individual and community mental and moral state)

Although not inclusive, these were three goals that were connected to literary character and were observed as themes within the writings produced among literary societies. Students will then write their own broadside across these literary themes.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

History

- Enable learners to develop historical comprehension in order that they might reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage, identify the central question(s) addressed in historical narrative, draw upon data in historical maps, charts, and other graphic organizers; and draw upon visual, literary, or musical sources

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (Standard 2)
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes (Standard 5)
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (Standard 11)

Activity

1. Begin the lesson by providing the following quote to the students, “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have other’s spoken for us.” This was first printed in the 1827 augural issue of *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American newspaper. This newspaper was pivotal as literary societies took shape and the editors were two of the many founding members among literary groups. Many literary societies subscribed to and published writings within this journal.
2. Introduce literary societies by discussing the meaning of this quote. Provide a context for the students along with a brief background of the existence and development of literary societies; including when and why they were started and their larger goals.
3. Give students the extended text below from this quote and teach the meanings of the three literary themes above and how the three themes are enacted within the language of the writing. The underlined vocabulary should be taught in the context of learning about literary societies.

We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have other’s spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.... Education being an object of the highest importance to the welfare of society, we shall endeavor to present just and adequate views of it, and to urge upon our brethren the necessity and expediency of training their children, while young, to habits of industry and thus forming them for being useful members of society. It is surely time that we should awake from this lethargy of years, and make a concentrated effort for the education of our youth.

From the *Freedom’s Journal*, Volume 1, No. 1, March 16, 1827

4. Engage the students in a discussion of this piece of writing around the themes of the lesson and together complete the literary theme graphic organizer.
5. Organize the students into groups of 4-6 and give each group a piece of writing (see examples).
6. Have students individually and silently read and then discuss its meaning within their groups.
7. Hand out copies of the graphic organizer and have the students discuss the three themes and complete the graphic organizer together.
8. Have students then separately write across the three themes in a broadside or genre of their choice. They could either use the same style and genre of the model example they read or select a different genre.
9. Invite students to share their writings with the class (project the writing and have students read their writings)
10. Write alongside students and share your writing.

Assessment

1. Collect and examine their graphic organizers of the three themes
2. Listen and contribute to each group's discussion
3. Read their writings to examine if and how they wrote across the three themes

Teacher Resources

Writing Samples for Lesson Plan:

1. Brethren—In viewing the exertions which are now making, by surrounding nations, to ameliorate and improve the condition of man, we cannot longer sit, as idle spectators, to these great movements, without exerting ourselves, and using the means which a kind and beneficent Providence has placed in our hands, for the improvement of ourselves, and our youth. Our chief aim will be to refer you to our rising generation, who through the philanthropy of the laws of Pennsylvania, are now engaged in acquiring the first rudiments of Education. We are well acquainted from experience with their present limited opportunities of improvement, and we feel bound to open an Institution to which they may repair and qualify themselves, for future usefulness.

From *Freedom's Journal*, June 20, 1828

Public address by William Whipper on the Reading Room Society for Men of Colour, March 28, 1828

2. Conscious that among the various pursuits that have engaged the attention of mankind in the different eras of the world, none have ever been considered by persons of judgment and penetration, as superior to the cultivation of the intellectual powers bestowed upon us by the God of nature. It therefore becomes a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in a great measure, break down the strong behavior of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion, but who are with ourselves, children of one Eternal Parent, and by his immutable law, we are entitled to the same rights and privileges; therefore, we, whose names are hereunto subscribed, do agree to form ourselves into a society for the promotion of this great object, to be called 'The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia.'

From the *Liberator*, December 3, 1831, page 196, Preamble of The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia

3. Too long has it been the policy of our enemies to persuade us that we [free people of color] are a superior race to the slaves, and that our superiority is owing to a mixture with the whites. Away with this idea, cast it from you with the indignation it deserves, and dare to assert that the black man is equal by nature with the white, and that slavery and not his color has debased him. Yet dare to tell our enemies, that with the powerful weapons of religion and education, we will do battle with the host of prejudice which surround us, satisfied that in the end we shall be more than conquerors.

From an 1832 address to the Female Literary Association published in the *Liberator's* "Ladies Department" column by an anonymous writer.

4. Messrs. Editors: Aware that you take a lively interest in the subject of the improvement and elevation of our colored population, I am free to address you in behalf of a Library and Reading Room lately opened by the executive committee of the Phoenix Society, for their benefits....Some among us are poor, and ignorant, and vicious, *because we have been neglected*. The time has come, in which we sincerely hope our community will not stop to find fault with our oppressed people, but turn their attention to their education, and to the improvement of their condition. Permit me, therefore, through your useful paper, to solicit donations from the favored citizens of New York, in books, maps, papers, money, & and for the benefit of our feeble institution....The objects of institution are general improvement, and the training of our youth to habits of reading and reflection.

From the *New York Observer*, December 7, 1833, Letter from Samuel E. Cornish advocating for donations for literary society

5. Things which concern Colored Americans: There is, perhaps, no other people in the world. So much interested in all the measures of moral and intellectual improvements, as the colored people of these United States. No other people have been so completely robbed, of all the rights of man, as have colored Americans. We have suffered bondage in the midst of freedom—we have been bourn down in poverty, and disgrace, whilst wealth and honors have abounded in our land. We have been kept in darkness and ignorance, while other classes of our fellow citizens, have enjoyed light and learning, and liberty, unequalled in the history of nations. And now, I speak advisedly, the set time of our redemptions is come. How shall we think, and feel and act? We live not in an age of miracles, but in an age of faith and works. In our day, effects result from causes—grand enterprises—great purposes are carried on, and accomplished by human agencies. If our colored population desire to be useful and respected—If they would have their rights and attain their level, they must use the means, and adopt the measures of elevation and respectability.

From the *Colored American*, July 15, 1837 entitled, “Things which concern Colored Americans”

6. It is essential to our highest interest, it is due to our self-respect, to the justice of our cause, and to our brethren in chains, to seize upon every facility afforded us for mental and moral improvement... We must appreciate the work of mind, and cultivate a taste for literary pursuits. Societies for mental improvement should be formed in every town. Their place of meeting should be regarded as the people’s Banquet Hall; not indeed to assemble and offer incense on the shrine of sensual gratification; but to partake of an intellectual feast. Not to indulge in potations whose tendency is to destroy all that is noble and sublime in man, and degrade him below the level of the brute; but to quaff healthy draught from the golden cup of science. Not as votaries of pleasure, to wile away the hours in the mazy dance; but, guided by imagination and reason, to scan the earth, and find the force that holds the planets in their spheres. Such societies will form the nucleus around which will centre the hopes of our people.

From the *Colored American* (1837-1842)

• **Literary Societies:**

<http://pa.gov/portal/server.pt/community/community/18326/education/673926>

<http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=LS2>

<http://washingtonart.com/beltway/bethel.html>

<http://www.emory.edu/alicewalker/sub-about.htm>

From the Goals of The Phoenix Society of New York, *Liberator*, June 29, 1833

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text5/nyphoenixsociety.pdf>

• **Freedom’s Journal:** This site gives the full archive of the journal.

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/>

• **Research Articles:**

1. Jacqueline Bacon & Glen McClish, “Reinventing the Master’s Tools: Nineteenth Century African-American Literary Societies of Philadelphia and Rhetorical Education,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 (2000): 19-47.

2. Tony Martin, “The Banneker Literary Institution of Philadelphia: African American Intellectual Activism Before the War of the Slaveholders’ Rebellion,” *The Journal of African American History* 87 (2002): 303-322.

3. Elizabeth McHenry & Shirley Brice Heath, “The Literate and the Literary: African Americans as Writers and Readers—1830-1940,” *Written Communication* 11 (1994): 419-443.