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“Phenomenal Women,” Collaborative Literacies, and Community Texts in Alternative “Sista” Spaces¹

Beverly J. Moss

The work highlighted in this essay focuses on an ethnographic study of a group of African American women, members of Phenomenal Women, Incorporated, who come together not necessarily to read and write, but who, in their “sista space”—their club—often read and write when they come together. In this space, they promote self-help through reading and writing and use their literacy skills to promote civic action and engagement and cultural enrichment. This essay examines the literacy practices in which these women engage in two types of literacy events during their annual Black History Month celebrations.

In June of 2009, I was sitting in a small black church in a rural town in South Carolina at the funeral of my father’s last aunt, my ninety-three-year-old great-aunt Alverta, listening to one of her friends talk about how my aunt, as a young woman, had been a member of a black women’s club called the “Jollys.” It seemed that the Jollys got together so that they could do community service in the black community in this small town and participate in social functions. It was the first time that I had ever heard of any of the women in my family being part of such a community organization as a women’s club. I knew that my aunt had been a member of the Eastern Stars—the women’s auxiliary organization to the black Masons; however, the Jollys, a club established for Black women by Black women that was not set up in support of a male organization (as the Eastern Stars were), was new to me. I was struck by how I had just spent the past sixteen months researching other Black women in a club when I had a resource, now gone, in my own family. It was at that moment that this research project, which I saw as distant from my own personal life, really encouraged me to think about how Black women in my own family, women with limited means, had created spaces for themselves as Black women, to enrich their lives and the lives of their communities. What stories did they have to tell? What stories had many of them taken to their graves? That moment made the literacy stories of the women of Phenomenal Women Incorporated (P.W. Inc), the

Ohio-based African-American women's club featured in this essay, even more important to me.

In calling for more archival and observational research on the literacy of women in the introduction to their edited volume, *Women and Literacy: Local and Global Inquiries for a New Century*, Peter Mortensen and Beth Daniell assert that "Literate activity that is constitutive of gendered identity unfolds all around us all the time—in public institutions, in workplaces, in domestic spaces, in locations marked sacred and profane, in places that provide refuge from violence, and so on—and yet it is barely understood in specific relation to the socioeconomic and cultural particularities of these venues" (31). In considering the literacies of African-American women, I would alter their statement to read that "Literate activity that is constitutive of gendered and [racialized] identity unfolds all around us all the time: in public institutions, workplaces, domestic spaces, and [community spaces]." Literate activity and behavior in contemporary spaces such as community sites—spaces where people come together based on shared values and goals—provide much needed insight into how individuals, groups, and/or organizations value and use literacy, how they make it their own. To understand the complexities of the literacies which African American women use and how they use them, we must expand the spaces and sites in which we examine these practices. The work highlighted here focuses on African-American women who come together not necessarily to read and write, but who, in their "sista space"—their club—often read and write when they come together. In this space, they promote reading and writing, promote self-help through reading and writing, and use their literacy skills to promote civic action and engagement, and cultural enrichment.

Context of Research

While Anne Ruggles Gere's call for examining writing in the "extracurriculum" speaks to a broad range of contexts ("Kitchen Table"), to date the scholarship that focuses on African-American women's literacy practices, most notably Royster's *Traces of a Stream*, Logan's *We are Coming*, Peterson's *Doers of the Word*, and McHenry's *Forgotten Readers*, has been primarily historical. These important studies establish that African-American women, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, though constrained by racism and sexism, actively engaged in literacy practices that served their personal and public lives. In fact, Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Victoria Earle Matthews, Mary Church Terrell, Frances Harper, Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, among others, stood as exemplars of African-American women whose community service and activism were inextricably bound to their literacy practices. These women rhetors purposely used literacy to advocate for social change, to lift up their race, and to sustain their own intellectual growth. Much of the existing historical

scholarship reveals the role of African-American women's clubs, literary clubs in particular, in the activist literacy and discourse practices of African-American women. Because African-American women in the 19th and early 20th centuries were not welcome in most white women's clubs and because they felt a need to come together to promote their own growth and that of their own African-American communities, Black women, particularly educated ones, established their own literary societies. McHenry and Heath remind us that "most often, the clubs created by and for African Americans in the 19th century and early 20th century, were created to meet the intellectual needs of their members because they were denied access to such intellectual and literary societies because of racism and in the case of Black women, sexism" (424). In discussing the Black women's club movement, Royster states that,

the club movement actually permitted women with different matrices of identity, different perceptions of needs, and different priorities for sociopolitical mandates (cultural, social, political, economic, religious) to form a shared space—a community. From the shared space of club work these women articulated a 'common good,' charted courses of action, raised voices in counter distinction to mainstream disregard, and generated at least the capacity—if not the immediate possibility... to make themselves heard and appropriately responded to. By this process, the club women sustained their roles as critical sources of support for the educational, cultural, social, political, and economic development of the African-American community. (217)

Royster as well as McHenry and Heath point to African-American women recognizing and establishing an alternative space in which they could nurture their collective and individual talents, and from which they could collectively act on behalf of other African Americans. These clubs, as alternative "sista" spaces, the shared spaces that African-American women create for themselves, became important sites for literacy learning and literacy activities. These scholars demonstrate that the literacy practices and literate behavior practiced in these spaces provided these African-American women an opportunity to become visible, effective rhetors on behalf of equal rights for African Americans and women in a time when the received wisdom was that African Americans were incapable of any intellectual, literacy-related activity. While one cannot deny the value of the historical scholarship that has shed light on the literacy practices of African-American women—it is some of the finest work in literacy studies and represents a shift from deficit model scholarship that at one point seemed to dominate research on African Americans' literacy practices—there needs to be more focus on the literacy practices of contemporary African-American women,

particularly as they operate in nonacademic spaces. My current research is an attempt to add to this understudied area. I am particularly interested in what we can learn about literacy from adult, primarily middle-class African-American women, a somewhat neglected group, when they come together in their alternative, shared space.

While recent studies introduce us to alternate literacy sites, that is, sites outside formal institutions such as schools, these studies are small in number. McHenry, in addressing twenty-first century Black women's book clubs, discusses alternate sites of literacy as a "challenge to formal

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institutions and as a place to gain the kind of sustenance that many black intellectuals, especially black feminists, have defined as necessary for their intellectual growth" (314). Recent scholarship that highlights contemporary African-American women's literacy practices—for, example, Lanehart's study of her female relatives in *Sista, Speak*, Richardson's work on critical literacies of young (under 20 years of age) African-American women influenced by hip-hop culture ("she was workin'"), Cushman's work on the critical literacies of a group of inner-city, low-income African-American women—is valuable work which complicates how we characterize African-American women's public and private literacies. But these studies are

few in number and limited in scope. Yet, the theorizing that they do about African-American women's literacies acts as a starting point for my study. Specifically, Elaine Richardson, in *African American Literacies*, speaking about African-American female literacies, states that "African American females' language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classed world in which they employ their language and literacy practices to protect and advance themselves. Working from this rhetorical situation, the Black female develops creative strategies to overcome her situation, to 'make a way outa no way'" (77). This notion of how African-American women use literacy is further enhanced

by Royster, in *Traces of a Stream*, who states that “the theory begins with the notion that a community’s material conditions greatly define the range of what this group does with the written word and, to a degree, even how they do it. The pivotal idea is that what human beings do with writing, as illustrated by what African-American women have done, is an expression of self, of society, and of self in society” (5). What both Royster and Richardson highlight is that African-American women use their literacy skills and practices to create public and private rhetorical spaces for themselves and their communities. They use literacy, among other tools, to negotiate their journeys through paths often littered with racist, sexist, and classist obstructions. While I do not want to argue that literacy is an all-powerful tool that overcomes institutional racism, sexism, and classism—clearly that is not the case—I do want to suggest that contemporary, working- and middle-class African-American women make literacy work for them and their communities through community organizations such as Phenomenal Women Incorporated (more details about this organization follow below). Specifically, they engage literacies in ways that help them meet their needs (see discussion on Black History Month below). In this study I seek to find out what African-American women in P.W. Inc. do with the written word and how the material, social, and cultural conditions in which they operate—the economic, political, social, and religious contexts of their everyday lives—define the range of what they do as well as how they assume agency to define and shape the uses of literacy within the group and their lives. I am particularly interested in how the goals of the organization and the personal and/or professional goals of these African-American women come together to shape how they use and interact with literacy.

In this essay, I demonstrate how the women of P.W. Inc use literacy in their “sista space”—the space where they come together as Black women to act as a group and on behalf of their community—for their own cultural enrichment, as a way to strengthen their shared community ties, as a way to teach each other, and to teach other women.

The Study

I have just completed data collection for a 16-month ethnographic study of an African-American women’s community service club who call themselves Phenomenal Women Incorporated (see figure 1). I didn’t pick this club to study because I was interested in Black women’s clubs. I wasn’t. What I was and am interested in are the alternative spaces, that is, the non-institutional community spaces, in which African Americans use literacy. P.W. Inc is one such site. Data collection consisted of fieldnotes at monthly meetings, club-sponsored events, and events that the group members attend as official representatives of the club. I audiotaped meetings and audio or videotaped club-related events—like their 2008 Power Brunch in which they invited

three panelists who spoke to Black women from the community on HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and financial literacy. I have also interviewed individual members and focal groups within the organization. Finally, I made copies of documents written and/or read by the group at meetings and by individual members in the focal groups. I participated when possible and appropriate (and when invited) in club events; however, I remained primarily an observer-participant.

One of my specific goals in the larger study is to document and understand how the women in this organization use literacy as a group and individually to do the work of the group—work that they characterize as “helping the community” and “having a good time.” Simultaneously, I am examining how individual women in this organization use literacy in their personal and professional lives to determine which literacy practices, if any, routinely cross the personal-professional-public borders. My primary research questions include the following:

- What are the literacy practices that contemporary African-American women (in this organization) engage in that cross from personal to professional to public borders and vice versa?
- What are the literacy and language practices that define the civic and social practices of this African-American women’s community organization, and what is the relationship between those practices?
- What is the role of literacy sponsors (Brandt) in the work of P.W. Inc?

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on an aspect of the second question: the literacy practices that define the civic and social action of P.W. Inc.

Participants

Phenomenal Women, Inc, located in Columbus, Ohio, has been in existence since 1997. Its membership consists of 15 adult African-American women who range in age from mid-thirties to mid-sixties, with most of the women in their fifties and sixties. Many of them are retired from government county jobs. Only two members have college degrees; one of them—Robyn, the president at the time of the study—has a master’s degree in English and the other one—Millie, the vice-president from 2007-2009 and the president who succeeded Robyn—recently completed an MBA. However, several members started college, but for various reasons—marriage, pregnancy, family illness, lack of funds, or lack of interest—never finished.

The Club’s Origins

The club came into being because one member, Mawarine (Robyn’s mother) wanted to be in a club with other Black women with whom she could socialize and serve her community. Mawarine also saw the forming of the



Figure 1: Phenomenal Women Incorporated

club as a way to continue a legacy of civic engagement and activism passed down by the women in her family. She recalls how, as a child, she and her sister were influenced by her grandmother, great-aunt and mother, who had been active in church groups and Black women's clubs. It was from these women and her childhood experiences that Mawarine's "vision" evolved:

Actually, my vision for my club began when I was a little girl... It came from my grandmother... So I think my vision actually started when I was very young, especially, the social part, I think that watching my grandmother and my great-aunt get involved in their church, they led the church choir, they sang in the church choir...and I remember all of our church functions, and my grandmother taking us to be involved in the voter elections, she was always a member of the board for the elections, back in the days. And I think that's where I got my first vision 'cause I watched them gather up papers, go out and serve the community and they actually took me and my sister with them. They were involved in Blue Star Mothers, they were involved in... there's another program for men that have sons, for women that have sons in the service. So we were always involved with them. We used to go down to the veterans' building. So I actually got my vision for a club when I was 'bout nine, eight, seven, eight, nine years old and then my mother, who's my hero, my mother was involved in a club. And she was very, very social and I remember... My mom, I think it was on Fridays, they had their club meetings, every other Friday, or at

least once a month, they had a club meeting and they would go over to each other's houses. But I remember sitting there in the rooms listening.

(Mawarine, 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication presentation)

As this quote from Mawarine indicates, she is following in the tradition established by the women in her family, a tradition that involved her in community institutions like the church and in civic activities and community activities like the Board of Elections and support groups for veterans and their families. Historically, the African-American church has provided a space for members of African-American communities to engage in leadership training, socializing, activism, and education; therefore, it is not surprising that Mawarine points to church functions and the church itself as an important space in which her vision was nurtured. And a nine-year-old Mawarine noticing "them [her grandmother and great-aunt] gather up papers and go out to serve the community" also connects literacy artifacts—written documents—to the work of community service. Mawarine and her sister Charlene, another founding member, were raised with an awareness of how Black women used club spaces (and other community spaces) to engage in social, political, and community activism. This tradition has been passed down to Robyn, Mawarine's daughter, who is passing it down to her children (whom she brings to the meetings).

According to Robyn, Mawarine's daughter, when Mawarine retired, she wanted to be active in the community, but she also wanted to be active socially with other Black women. Robyn says of her mother that "she always wanted to belong to a club, but not one of those stuffy ones where you had to have a lot of money in the bank." And while most of the members would be considered lower middle- to middle-class, the \$50 annual dues and \$120-\$140 to cover tickets for their annual "Phenomenal Woman of the Year Signature Dinner" in which they honor an African-American woman in the community for her outstanding service, present challenges to some members. Thus middle class, for this study, really is fluid, indicating a more complex, dynamic notion of socioeconomic class for these women.

At the beginning of 2008, I formally began the ethnography. I gained access to the club through Robyn, the president during the time that I did the fieldwork, and her mother Mawarine. I had known Robyn since she was an undergraduate at Ohio State University. Though she was not my student, she had worked for me in a summer program when she was a master's student in my department. After that summer, I invited Robyn (and another graduate student) to my church to hear a famous visiting preacher. Eventually, she, her mother, and aunt, all founding members of P.W. Inc, joined the church to which I belonged. To date, there are five members of

P.W. Inc who are members of my church. However, I didn't know the club existed until about a year before I began the study.

There are a couple of things about the signed consent forms that I want to point out. First, the organization decided that they wanted me to use the organization's real name, Phenomenal Women Incorporated, rather than a pseudonym. Each member (without any prompting from me) also decided to waive confidentiality because they thought that it would help me in my research. As Robyn told me after they voted to participate in the study, "they want to be as helpful as possible." In her discussion of major socializing values surrounding African-American females' literacies, Richardson identifies "to serve and protect" as a major value, one that has worked for and against African-American women (*African American Literacies*). When these women agreed to be a part of the study, they felt an obligation to help me with my work—what Richardson would most likely categorize as part of that "serve and protect" value. That value is also evident in their mission statement, which reads as follows:

The mission of Phenomenal Women, Inc. is to provide women of diverse backgrounds the opportunity to enjoy social gatherings and community service activities that will enrich their lives, as well as the lives of others in the central Ohio area. We are women who hold shared values, interests, and goals. An organization founded by and for women, Phenomenal Women, Inc. strives to pursue the following goals:

- Serve the needs of the local community. Our interests include, but are not limited to, promoting the needs of senior citizens, battered women, and economically disadvantaged women and children
- Organize and participate in social activities which explore various cultures, traditions, and environments
- Provide professional and social networking
- Promote family and friendship
- Respect, honor, and privilege the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of women

(Phenomenal Women Incorporated, 1997)

There are many interesting things about the mission statement. First, it reflects founder Mawarine's goal of having a club that is active in serving the community as well as active socially, but social is cast primarily in the role of cultural and social enrichment for the members. Second, the mission statement does not name African-American women as their focus; however, in practice, it is a club for Black women. Third, though never mentioned in the mission statement, the members see the club as a faith-based organization. Each meeting opens and closes with a prayer, as does each club-sponsored event open with a prayer. Church events become club

events. For example, Robyn and Charlene invited the club to attend their church to hear Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright on his recent visit. Even though the mission statement makes no mention of race and religion, for the women, they are front and center. They never shy away from racial concerns. And even though they do not screen potential members based on any religious affiliation—they never ask about it nor talk about it in the meetings—they feel no need to hide their faith. When asked why the mission statement mentions neither race nor religion, members didn't seem overly concerned. They didn't feel the need to state what they see as obvious. Fourth, the mission statement acts as evidence that the women in the club are acutely aware of the material and social conditions in which they and those they wish to serve operate. And fifth, the mission statement is a collaboratively written document which stands as one of the first literacy artifacts generated by the club.

To fulfill their mission to serve the needs of the community, the members organize Mother's and Father's Day events and buy gifts for the Isabelle Ridgway Care Center nursing home patients (98% African-American), work for the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, give two \$500 college scholarships to high school graduates, and partner with a battered women's shelter and a community organization that serves the homeless to provide essential items for both populations. They sponsor the annual P.W. Inc. Power Brunch for African-American women (mentioned above) which brings speakers who focus on social, financial, and health issues important to African-American women. The Power Brunch is mentioned in a discussion about literacy because it is at this annual event that P.W. Inc. arranges for an exchange of information between two parties by bringing together community experts for an audience of African-American women from the community who have a desire for the information provided. The women are given information through oral presentations, question and answer periods, and through the numerous brochures and other print documents passed out or placed on the information table. The service events that I've listed, particularly the power brunch, are examples of activities that illustrate the civic and social activism of the club.

What has become clear during my time in the field is that most often, the social outings, cultural enrichment activities, and the service missions are intertwined; the boundaries are blurred. The monthly meetings are business and social. They conduct their business; they eat and talk. The service activities, the nursing home visits, and Power Brunch, for example, are social activities as well. In fact, serving the community is generally social, and the social serves the community. Located within the service, social, and cultural activities and events are important collective literacy practices which help the women meet the goals as stated in the mission statement. Specifically, these literacy practices, tied to literacy events, as

Heath defines them—any activity surrounding print—contribute to P.W. Inc members’ focus on enriching their lives and those of their community. As Royster and McHenry—and others who’ve done work on African-American club women—have established, self-help and self-determination are core missions in these clubs. Deborah Brandt asserts that “by necessity, African-American self-help institutions absorbed into their purview as many politically, socially, and culturally affirming functions as they could” (110). P.W. Inc is no different. The literacy events that I focus on below demonstrate specific socially and culturally affirming functions. I focus, primarily, on one major function—P.W. Inc. members’ commitment to their own intellectual and cultural growth through one club activity: the club’s annual celebration of Black History Month. I argue that both examples of this activity can be classified as literate activities and behaviors because they involve actual reading and writing practices and/or behavior associated with literacy. The examples discussed below are lengthy excerpts by necessity. Readers gain a stronger sense of the nature of the Black History Month literacy events through the longer examples.

Black History Month

Member Gloria felt that it was important that they, as a club, learn more about black history and culture. One of the ways that they have done so is through their Black History Month celebrations. During my very first observation, the February 2008 meeting, the women “prayed out” of their business meeting—that is closed with a prayer, and announced that it was time for their Black History Month assignments. Each woman had been assigned to read about an important black inventor, public figure, or topic related to African Americans. They were to bring that information to share with the club and assume the responsibility for teaching the club members something about their history and culture. For the women who forgot to do the assignment (three did), club members shared the books or printed texts from which they read or, rather than discussing people that they didn’t know, told the club about family members who, for them, fulfilled the requirement of an important black person. Members were encouraged, applauded, and appreciated for however they contributed. For the club, any contribution promotes intellectual growth and cultural enrichment, thus fulfilling an aspect of their mission statement. While on the surface, participation in this literacy event seems to be nothing more than a brief report, for these women, these acts honor where they come from and who they are—their legacy. I share two examples below. First Daryl shares with the club what she learned about Granville Woods, a black inventor who lived in Columbus; second, Sharon reports on Clarence Otis, a corporate executive. In the first example, note how Daryl both reports information and offers an astute critique of the failures of public education:

Daryl: I'm gonna read about Granville T. Woods. I picked this one because I opened up the front of this book to find something to read. And this is stuff that my grandmother gave my kids when they were little because they went to Southwestern City School District and you don't get a lot of Black history there. You only get what's in that little section of the history book. So she wanted them to always, you know, have something. And this is stuff they used to give her when she was in the Black Caucus and stuff before she passed away. And I picked one, Granville T. Woods. He was a Columbus, Ohio native. He developed mechanical and electrical engineering skills quickly as a young man and made important contributions to Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison. Over the span of his career, he earned about 50 patents, including one for an incubator which was the forerunner of present machines capable of hatching 50,000 eggs at a time. Woods' inventions improved and changed America's communications and railroads with such things as steam boilers, brakes systems, and electrical power lines for railroads. One of his most famous inventions assigned to the New Bell Telephone Company enabled operators to speak or use Morse code on telegraph networks. He also developed a system of transmitting messages between moving trains and the new electrical railroad systems which required no exposed wires, secondary batteries, or slided guideways. Woods' inventions were sold to many large companies including the Bell System, as well as Westinghouse, General Electric, and the New Haven Railroad. Um, there's like several different things about different people here and if somebody wants to read one. And there was one thing—I mean this is a list, you know, of different things that happened but I never knew that they actually had documented that the first African-American child born in America was born on January 3, 1624.

Daryl offers, in her presentation on Granville Woods, a critique of public education for its failure to teach black children about black history and culture. She also references how her grandmother provided material for her children. Thus this literacy event, which acts as a corrective for the failure of public education to do its job, also provides evidence of a tradition, at least within Daryl's family, of actions taken to counter the failure of at least one public school system. Daryl also documents a legacy of community activism in her family when she references, though briefly, her grandmother's involvement in the local Black Caucus. In addition, there is a veiled critique of the publishing industry and history textbooks, in general,

when Daryl refers to “that little section of the history book.” The implication is that history textbooks, being part of public education, are complicit in ignoring African-American history. Daryl’s point that “you don’t get a lot of black history there,” while uttered about a particular school system, is clearly a sentiment that motivates the women’s engagement in this literacy activity. Sharon’s presentation continues this act of providing to African-American women what they don’t get in school.

Sharon: Um, mine’s on the CEO of Red Lobster and Olive Garden.

Mawarine (spoken enthusiastically): Hey, all right!

Sharon: His name is Clarence Otis, Jr., and he’s the CEO of Darden Restaurants, the largest casual dining operation in the nation. Um, he was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and he moved to Los Angeles, when he was six. His father was a high school drop-out who worked as a janitor. They lived in Watts, during the Watts riots in 1965. And, he remembers being stopped and questioned by the police several times a year because of the color of his skin. His high school counselor recommended him for a scholarship to Williams College, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Williams and went on to get a law degree. And he landed on Wall Street as a mergers and acquisition attorney for J.P. Morgan securities. And he joined Darden Restaurants in 1995, and became the CEO in 2004.

Mawarine: Wait a minute, wait a minute! You’re saying that the CEO of the Red Lobster and Olive Garden is Black?

[**Someone**]: Yeah!

Charlene: I did not know that.

Mawarine: You all knew that?

Charlene: I did not know that.

Millie: I saw that a couple months ago.

Mawarine: You’re kidding! I did not even know that!

Gloria: That’s why it’s important that we need to know us some stuff about Black history.

[**Someone**]: Say the name again.

Sharon: Um, Clarence Otis, Jr.

Mawarine: Clarence Otis, Jr. is Black?

Charlene: I had no idea.

Mawarine: I didn't either!

Mawarine: Well, I'm just flabbergasted.

Charlene: I did not know that.

Mawarine: I did not know. So he was the one who started the, he was the—how did he get started with the Red Lobster?

Sharon: He just joined the company, uh, and they promoted him to CEO in 2004.

The conversation that takes place after Sharon's presentation on Clarence Otis, Jr. highlights not only the women's incredulity that they didn't know about him, but it also highlights their pride at finding out that a black man was the CEO of this major restaurant chain. We can also see how this literacy event is situated within the social, cultural, political, and material situation in which they, as African-American women, operate. The club, understanding the exigencies which led to the creation of Black History Month—namely the institutional racism which refused to acknowledge the presence of and the contributions of African Americans in the building of this country—felt an obligation and a need to be agents in promoting the goals of Black History Month—to learn about and celebrate African-American achievements and contributions to the U.S. They are, through this literacy event, as Royster suggests, "raising their voices in counter distinction to mainstream disregard" (217). This particular literacy event emerges out of a non-institutional educational setting of their own making, in which the women have challenged themselves to become lifelong learners about their history and culture. As Gloria implies in her statement (highlighted above) it is important that they know about their history and culture. They were participating in this literacy event in an alternative literacy site—a club meeting—which Black women have traditionally used since the 19th century to celebrate their cultural heritage.

A closer look at Sharon's excerpt reveals rhetorical patterns that call attention to how these women engage with specific literate texts. Obviously, the talk surrounding the written texts stands out as an important way for P.W. Inc members to participate in the text. Specifically, I want to point out two patterns that the women used often—questioning and repetition. First, questioning appears to be used in two ways: to gain information to clarify a point and/or to confirm a point. For example, Mawarine asks Sharon "how did he get started with the Red Lobster?" Although Sharon had provided that information in her "report" on Clarence Otis, Jr., Mawarine's question is

clearly a request for information. However, Mawarine's first question, "you're saying that the CEO of the Red Lobster and Olive Garden is Black?" is not a request for information; it is to request confirmation of a surprising point—that a Black man is the CEO of a popular national restaurant chain. The use of repetition is one of the other major rhetorical strategies which the women employ. Much like the use of questioning to confirm, the women in this example use repetition of clauses/statements for confirmation. Charlene and Mawarine are the primary employers of this strategy in this example:

Charlene: I did not know that.

Mawarine: You all knew that?

Charlene: I did not know that.

While they know the information to be accurate, their repetition of "I did not know that" signals how amazing this information is. The repetition emphasizes the weight of the information that has just been shared as well as the need to have that information confirmed by group members. I find it interesting that for these women the information in the written document is not enough, by itself, to be taken as truth; however, with the confirmation by group members that this information is indeed accurate, the written text is reinforced. The use of questioning and repetition (a strategy drawn from oral traditions) are also prominent patterns in the second Black History Month celebration discussed below.

In February 2009, the club decided to change its black history celebration. Actually, Robyn suggested that rather than have every member bring in a short text to read about an important African American, the club should read Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. Given the recent election of Obama as president, this was not an unusual change. Club members had followed the election closely, held an inauguration party, and one member—Veronica—had purchased a book with photographs and newspaper articles documenting the entire election. Therefore, club members were eager to read the book. However, it was the first time that the club had read a book as a group. As individuals, many are voracious readers of mysteries, romance novels, black literature and history. However, they are not a book club. But they embarked down this new path. Each member was assigned two chapters of the book for which they were accountable. I, too, was assigned two chapters. And every person's chapters overlapped with another's. For example, I was assigned chapters 7 and 8, and another member was assigned chapters 6 and 7. Robyn proceeded this way because she didn't want any one member to be responsible for having to read a 400+ page book. The following excerpt is quite lengthy so that readers can see how the club members engage the patterns highlighted and analyzed below. Note what happens in this discussion. Dana, who was responsible for chapters

two and three, provides a summary of the chapters for the sake of the people who had not read the chapters she was assigned; in between the summary is analysis and commentary, and most importantly, there is engagement in the discussion.

Dana: I had chapters two and three. And he talked about, um, Indonesia. They went, they was living in Indonesia, and uh, his mother's second husband, Lolo.

[Someone]: Lolo.

[Others]: Lolo.

Dana: Talked about him, and um, the conditions and how they lived in Indonesia, and the foods. Ew, my goodness! They ate some things in Indonesia! Some bugs! [laughs] And iguanas! And all kinds of stuff. Um. [pause] That's about, he talked, yeah, it was mostly, both these chapters, two and three, and then um, he came, they came back. He came, they, his mother sent him back, and he stayed with his grandparents, and um, they were going, they went through some things, his grandparents, about um, they loved him and they stuck by him. You know, they really did, you know. Um.

Veronica: What kind of things did they go through?

Dana: Um. [whispers] She's quizzing me!

Mawarine: They used to call him names. When he was in Hawaii, and they called him names.

Charlene: Were they living there in Hawaii then?

Dana: Yeah, they lived in, he lived, his grandparents lived in Hawaii.

Charlene: Oh, okay.

Dana: They lived in several places, and they ended up in Hawaii.

Robyn: Yeah, they started off in Kansas. The mother was born in Kansas.

Dana: They started in Kansas. Then they went to, they went to Washington state, I believe.

Robyn: Uh huh.

Dana: And then, his grandfather worked for a furniture company.

Mawarine: Right.

Dana: And the furniture company opened up another store in Hawaii.

Robyn: That's how they ended up in Hawaii.

Dana: So that's how they got to Hawaii. And um—

Robyn: His grandmother worked for a bank.

Mawarine: But that was later on.

Dana: Yeah, but they talked about that later on. They talked about that later on. Um, his grandfather, you know, I think they tried to shield him as much as they could from the racism, but you know, it was there. And um [pause] he talked about the schools he went to. They sent him to a private school, and he called, his grandmother was "Toot."

Robyn: Toot. [laughs]

Dana: Toot. And his grandfather, and um. [pause] It's been awhile. I started this weeks ago! [laughs] [pause] I think his father, his father, they told him a lot about his father, too. Cause he was six when he—. He was two or three when his father left. Then he came back when he was six, and he stayed for the month. He stayed a month with him.

Robyn: Didn't you think that was—? Who had that chapter when the father came back?

Dana: And they just took him in!

Robyn: Yeah! And I got the feeling that there were some flames still there.

Dana: Yeah.

Robyn: Did you get that feeling when he came back?

Dana: Yeah. She—

Robyn: Because Obama walked in, cause they let him have an apartment.

.....

Dana: They was mesmerized by him.

Robyn: Right.

Mawarine: Because he was educated. That's why everybody [loved him].

Dana: He was very educated.

[sounds of children playing, running]

Robyn: But yeah, you definitely got the sense that they, they really loved that man.

Dana: He, and the mother met the second husband, and he was a good guy, and his, when he went back to Indonesia, it kind of broke his spirit. It broke his—because he went back, he came to America to go to school to go back there to—

Robyn: Help them.

Dana: To help them do things. But when he got back there, them Indonesians wasn't having it. They kind, yeah and um. They really didn't get into—He really I don't think knew what really happened, but something with the government.

Robyn: Right.

Dana: The government, um, kind of—



Figure 2: February 2009 Black History Month discussion of Obama's Dreams from My Father

Robyn: They made it really difficult.

Dana: Yeah, they made it difficult.

Veronica: For who?

Dana: For the guy, the husband, the other husband.

Robyn: The second husband. Yeah, yeah. I think he was trying to improve things. And you know how corruption works.

Dana: And, and the Indonesians [in the government] are very corrupt. It was very, very corrupt.

Robyn: Umm hmm. Umm hmm. And then it seemed like, yeah.

The entire discussion of the book, which took a little over an hour, followed a pattern: summary, commentary, analysis, and most often, connecting to current issues. The impetus for the entire discussion is the current connection to Barack Obama's election. Throughout this part of the discussion, different members, namely Veronica and Charlene, ask questions for clarification ("what kind of things did they go through?"; "Were they living in Hawaii then?"). Robyn asks questions to solicit opinions from the group ("Did you get that feeling when he came back?"). Other patterns emerge. Specifically, Robyn and Mawarine, at times, act as co-leaders with Dana of this part of the book discussion. They constantly add details to assist Dana as she talks about her two chapters.

Dana: Yeah. She—

Robyn: Because Obama walked in, cause they let him have an apartment.

Dana: Yeah, they got—

Robyn: There was a separate apartment

Dana: They cleaned out an apartment.

Robyn: Right, so he stayed cause he was here, he was there for about a month.

Dana: Month. Yeah.

Robyn: And Obama came in, and the mother was ironing the father's shirt.

Dana: Shirt.

Robyn: And I got the sense, mm hmmm. [laughs]

Dana: And he was like everything, he said for, I think he, didn't he stay, for a minute there, for that time, it was like everything went back to the way it was before his father left.

Robyn: Right, right.

Mawarine: Because she loved him.

Robyn: She did love him.

Dana: Everybody. Not only her, but the grandfather.

Robyn: Everybody. They all loved him!

Dana: They all loved him.

Mawarine: Because he was educated.

Even though Dana is the primary leader of the excerpted part of the discussion, she is clearly not the only one. Robyn and Mawarine collaborate in the direction that this discussion takes. During the discussion of most of the chapters, the collaboration that is evident above is more the norm than the exception. Mawarine collaborates with Dana to reiterate (a form of repetition) the level of education of the senior Obama—clearly a detail that holds significance for Dana and Mawarine and, as they point out, to Barack Obama's family as well. A closer examination of this small excerpt and the longer one from which it is taken also demonstrates how the women of P.W. Inc employ another dimension of the repetition pattern. Again, they repeat words, phrases, and clauses generally to confirm information; however, this pattern is employed in a call-and-response style similar to that practiced in African-American churches. The first example appears at the beginning of the lengthy excerpt when Dana mentions Obama's stepfather's name, "Lolo." Someone immediately repeats his name, "Lolo"; then, several others repeat the name "Lolo." The call and response- repetition pattern is even more evident in the exchange between Dana, Robyn, and Mawarine:

Mawarine: Because she loved him.

Robyn: She did love him.

Dana: Everybody. Not only her, but the grandfather.

Robyn: Everybody. They all loved him!

Dana: They all loved him.

This kind of repetition can be witnessed in African-American churches all over the United States. Ministers and congregations participate in a dialogue where the congregations answer back (respond) to the

ministers' calls. Those responses often come in the form of repeating what the minister has said (see Moss "Community Text" for a more detailed discussion of call and response). Another form of call and response is for the congregation to indicate their approval of the minister's message and preaching style with affirmative words such as "yes" or "you right" among other words. Robyn engages in a similar strategy with Dana with her response of "right" numerous times throughout the long excerpt. Robyn's use of "right" affirms Dana and confirms Dana's summary and analysis. In a sense, the women engage in a kind of intertextuality by importing textual strategies from one genre and venue into texts in a different genre and venue.

Not unlike what happens in book club discussions (though P.W. Inc. is not a book club), talk about the written text dominates. The participants rely on their collective conversation about the book as the primary means of engaging in this literacy event. The oral reinforces their literacy practices here. The written text—the book—is the center of the lively discussion.

In addition to the patterns noted above, several times in this excerpt members draw conclusions from the available data in the chapters. For example, the women look at the actions of the family toward Obama's estranged father when he returns to see his son and stays for a month. The club members conclude that everyone in the family loved Obama's father. They conclude that the Indonesian government was corrupt based on how it treated Obama's stepfather. The women are not just engaging in plot summary as they read and discuss this text. They look for evidence in the text to support their assumptions and claims; they pay attention to details (e.g., who is ironing a shirt). Also, through reading the book, the women are learning about cultures foreign to them, and about the newly elected president. However, I would argue that something else is going on. The club, through these literacy activities during the Black History Month celebration, acts as literacy sponsor for its own members. Deborah Brandt, who has turned to *Sponsors of Literacy* [my emphasis] as a conceptual approach, defines sponsors as:

any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way. It is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use. Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and in fact, may conflict), sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. (19)

Clearly, P.W. Inc members are the primary agents who enable, support, teach and model, as well as regulate literacy in this specific setting. While one can argue that the occasion of Black History Month is the underwriter

and, hence, sponsor of these literacy events, that would erase the agency of these women. It is more reasonable to recognize that these women, through their own agency, see themselves as fulfilling an important aspect of their club mission. They are, in fact, the sponsors and the sponsored, thus placing a different spin on Brandt's notion of sponsorship by deemphasizing sponsorship as a top-down approach. The advantage that the women gain, as self-sponsors, is cultural knowledge. At the same time, they fulfill the obligation of self-help. I would also argue that through their collective literacy acts as highlighted in these two different types of examples, the women are not engaged in reading an individual text; they are engaged in the making of community texts. In previous work ("Community Text"), I suggest that a community text is that in which the author and the audience collaborate to complete a text, as in an African-American sermon, where the sermon is seen as a dialogue between minister and congregation. However, in this example from P.W. Inc, the notion of a community text has been extended; that is, these women have presented another perspective from which to examine how they co-create a community text. It is not only the public act of reading as a group, but also the act of reading for their group; each member is reading for their other members. Members' individual readings are situated within the collective reading to make meaning of the book. The whole book is read only when all the individual assigned parts become a whole. The text becomes the group's text—a community text through which they meet goals as set out in the mission statement. In this sense, they engage in collaborative literacies to create these community texts within their *sista* spaces. As stated earlier, this *sista* space acts as an alternative literacy site in which these phenomenal women demonstrate how they use the written word to, as Royster suggests, express themselves in society.

Conclusion

The ways that questioning and call and response-repetition patterns are used by P.W. Inc. reinforce the collaborative nature of the literacy practices that characterize the 2008 and 2009 Black History Month celebrations. Clearly, collaborative literacy practices are not unique to P.W. Inc. However, the ways in which the women of P.W. Inc use these literacy practices is worth noting because they provide a means for the club to fulfill their mission to "enjoy social gatherings and community service activities that will enrich their lives ...". The practices highlighted in this essay, though emerging from only two literacy events, turn our gaze to how literacy, through the creating of community texts and collaborative literacy practices, reinforces *sista* bonds—those cultural ties that bind this group of African-American women—within this *sista* space. In addition, the literacy practices on which I focus in this essay point toward the way that literacy practices from

multiple community sites, like churches, can act as foundational for literacy practices which emerge in other alternative spaces.

Even though race and gender discrimination still exist and Black women still operate in a society in which they face major obstacles, they are not in the same place as African-American clubwomen in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet, many of their goals are similar. The motto coined by the National Association of Colored Women in 1895, “lifting as we climb,” is just as relevant for P.W. Inc as it was for African-American clubwomen over a century ago. The activities highlighted here point to P.W. Inc’s commitment to increasing their cultural knowledge by uplifting themselves, and thus, their community. They have created, in P.W. Inc, a *sista* space—a private, community site of their own in which to value, engage, and use literacy as a communal, social act which strengthens their bonds as Black women, enriches their lives, and provides them with the opportunity to, as Royster asserts, “sustain their roles as critical sources of support for the educational, cultural, social, political, and economic development of the African American community” (217).

Endnotes

1. Portions of this essay have been presented at Florida State University and Texas Christian University.

2. Robyn was often in the role of what Brandt might describe as a literacy sponsor because she encouraged and sometimes provided opportunities for engaging in literacy practices. Robyn and I suggest that “literacy sponsor” does not adequately cover Robyn’s role in the club (see Moss and Robinson, “Making Literacy Work: A ‘Phenomenal Woman’ Negotiating Her Literacy Identity in an African American Women’s Club,” forthcoming in *Literacy, Economy, and Power*. Eds. Christoph et al.)

3. I was also asked to discuss an important black person in the February 2008 meeting as were the children present at the meeting. Members’ children are almost always at meetings. During every Black History Month, the children are asked to participate in sharing what they’ve learned about black history and culture.

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