

Beyond Basic Reading and Writing: The People's House and the Political Literacy Education of the Student-Activists of the Black Liberation Front International, 1968-1975

Joy Karega Oberlin College

KEYWORDS

political literacy, Black students, translanguaging, critical reading, collaborative writing

Jacqueline Jones-Royster and Jean C. Williams have critiqued trends in rhetoric and composition that have reinforced what they describe as “a deepening sense that African Americans entered the university during the 60s era and that, as students of color, they entered quite predictably as basic writers and only as basic writers” (571). Although the authors’ goal is to adjust and broaden the historical lens of analysis, this “deepening sense” Royster and Williams describe should be understood as an issue of representation. The conflation of basic writing and Black college students of the sixties and seventies is a direct consequence of a network of historical practices that positioned these students in the public sphere as the products of open admission programs and marked them as politically militant but underprepared and lacking in linguistic resources and rhetorical agency. For example, historicizing the birth of basic writing programs in the sixties and seventies, Bruce Horner suggests that two schools of thoughts were at work. First, because open admission was viewed by many as a quota system that was responsive to the political climate, it was commonly believed that prototypical open admission students were activists and ethnic minorities. Second, because student activism was often conflated with a lack of academic preparation, the public rhetorics of administrators and educators traditionally constructed these students as in need of remediation and incapable of excelling academically because of their interest in political affairs. Listen to the comments of education professor Lewis Mayhew, who directly linked student activists with illiteracy and language deficit theories:¹

Dissenting youth ... all too frequently seem unable to say or write a simple English sentence. Their concerns are expressed...in a...flow of words possessing neither syntax or grammatical effectiveness...So pronounced are these linguistic failures that I have begun to wonder whether or not they might represent a pathology worthy of some further study. (qtd in Horner 8)

As Min-Zhan Lu points out, CUNY educator Geoffrey Wagner even went as far as to characterize open admission students as “dunces [. . . misfits . . . hostile mental children . . . and the most sluggish of animals” (“Conflict and Struggle” 34) and basic writing courses offered at City College in New York as “a form of political psychotherapy, a welfare agency, and an entertainment center” for Black

and other ethnic minority students (34).

Of course, by 1977, Mina Shaughnessy had spent almost a decade attempting to complicate these representational politics through her work as director of the SEEK and Writing programs at City College. In her seminal text on basic writing, Shaughnessy made it clear that most of the students who were the focus of her study were from “one of New York’s ethnic or racial enclaves” (3), and to her credit, she didn’t evoke language deficit theories to explain these students’ poor performance in the writing classroom. But Shaughnessy still reinforced a view of these students as underprepared because she relied on a prescriptive but acontextual approach that inadequately considered the political dimensions of their writing practices. As Lu suggests, Shaughnessy’s essentialist view of language—that differences in languages and conventions do not change the essential meaning communicated—privileged academic discourse as intellectually rigorous and politically “innocent” and compromised her ability to see the writing these students composed in the basic writing classroom as a site of struggle amongst relations of power and competing discourses and epistemologies (“Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy”). For Shaughnessy—and compositionists who aligned themselves with her work—these students’ “errors” were the result of their positioning as novices in the basic writing classroom, their unfamiliarity with the conventions of academic discourse, and their lack of confidence in themselves as academic readers and writers.

In this article, I want to apply pressure to the representational politics that were tied to both Shaughnessy’s work and the public rhetorics of administrators and educators during the period. Since the publication of Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* and the burgeoning of basic writing as a sub-discipline in rhetoric and composition, much of the disciplinary research on Black college students of the sixties and seventies has left these representational politics under-challenged because it has uncomplicatedly tied these students to basic writing historiography. Expanding our purview beyond City College, basic writing, and open admissions, I want to counteract these disciplinary trends by directing our attention to the extracurriculum and authorizing it as a site where historiographers can recover histories that illustrate the co-constitutive relationship that was at work between the political activism of Black students of the sixties and seventies and their development as readers and writers. This article presents one such history that recovers and analyzes the political literacy education and practices of the student-activists of the Black Liberation Front International (BLFI), a Black student organization at Michigan State University from 1968 to 1975. Scholars generating work on the extracurriculum have demonstrated that literacy learning and development does occur outside of the classroom (e.g., Brandt; Gere; Moss; Sharer). In offering this recovered history, my aim, then, is to bring to light a nonacademic political space that functioned as a site of literacy education for the BLFI activists and to showcase how this site of literacy education provided the BLFI activists with opportunities to negotiate the demands of reading and writing.

I use the term “site of literacy education” in the same way that Shirley Wilson Logan uses the term “site of rhetorical education.” In *Liberating Language*, Logan characterizes plantations, the pulpits of Black churches, literary and debating societies in Black Civil War units, Black political leagues, workplace factories, and the Black press as important sites of rhetorical education for nineteenth-century Black Americans. Logan takes care to point out that these were nonacademic

sites where nineteenth-century Black Americans rarely received explicit instruction in rhetorical theory and performance. Instead, Logan defines these sites of rhetorical education as places where nineteenth-century Black Americans were involved in acts of communication and were the recipients of information disseminated through the practices of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These were sites where nineteenth-century Black Americans “acquired and developed the rhetorical astuteness to negotiate a hostile environment and at the same time established a common language employed both to interact with and to challenge and change this environment” (Logan 3). Similarly, there were nonacademic political sites that enabled the BLFI activists to negotiate and enact a range of political ideologies and organizational strategies through reading and writing activities. These were sites where the BLFI activists learned and practiced literacy for political aims. This article narrows its focus to one of these sites—a place the BLFI activists affectionately called The People’s House.

In 1967, Michigan State University initiated the Detroit Project, and while it wasn’t an open admission program, it did represent a shift in university policy in admission of minority students. In its first year of implementation, it brought 67 Black students to MSU. Despite the Detroit Project’s success in increasing Black student enrollment, historical records suggest that Black students were not readily accepted at MSU during this period of intensified recruitment and admissions. To counter these conditions, Black students carved out space on campus by creating Black population centers in the dorms and securing off-campus housing. These were social spaces, however, and for the student-activists of the newly formed Black Liberation Front International, they were insufficient in terms of providing space to actively pursue their political interests that were emerging and developing in response to the Black radicalism that was sweeping the period. As Ibram H. Rogers notes in his study on the Black Campus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, at institutions across the country, Black student activism was intensifying. With the formation of Black Student Unions (BSUs), members of these organizations were calling for a reconstitution of higher education, advocating for Black and Ethnic Studies programs, fighting for the rights of Black nonacademic workers, launching all forms of community activism (e.g., food drives, tutoring programs, day care services, reading and study groups), campaigning to free political prisoners, and combating gentrification in Black communities. By the fall semester of 1968, the BLFI activists had also witnessed the radicalization of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Stokely Carmichael’s calls for Black Power. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and the uprisings in cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Watts, and Newark were reinforcing Carmichael’s call to action, and the political interests of the BLFI activists were also being fueled by African decolonization efforts, Third World independence movements, and the BLFI activists’ developing relationships with national and local organizations invested in the internationalization of the Black Power Movement.²

Indeed, finding a space where they could foster the development of these emerging political interests was imperative, and in 1968, the BLFI activists found such a space when two Kenyan graduate students, Maina-wa Kinyatti and Kamuyu Kang’ethe, decided to convert the three-bedroom, two-story house they were renting into The People’s House. Upon their arrival at MSU, Kinyatti and Kang’ethe established a Michigan chapter of the Pan-African Students Organization and Association (PASOA); they were dedicated to using The People’s House to bring together Black and

African students for social gatherings and political meetings and discussions. But within a year of its inception, the kinds of political activities that The People's House supported were extended to include a range of politicized literacy activities. Here, through their critical reading and collaborative writing practices, the BLFI activists organized with PASOA, defined the BLFI's political agenda, and worked towards producing Black student activists who were both theoreticians and organizers, actively participating in the cause of Black liberation on campus and in their surrounding communities.

In what follows, I examine the critical reading and collaborative writing practices that The People's House supported, considering how such practices construct The People's House as a site of literacy education and pose a challenge to the politics that marked Black students of the sixties and seventies as politically militant but rhetorically bankrupt and/or remedial in their literate practices. I begin with an examination of the BLFI activists' political aims and their relationship with the Trinidadian intellectual and activist C.L.R. James. In doing so, I recount how James's positioning as the BLFI activists' "personal Professor Emeritus" created the contexts for the BLFI activists to organize reading groups at The People's House, where they developed a form of critical reading praxis that enhanced their abilities to engage reading as a political, rhetorical, and epistemic act. Next, I turn to the collaborative writing the BLFI activists composed at The People's House, examining such texts within a translingual framework. Contesting monolingualism in US composition, translingualists tend to work from one or more of several tenets, ranging from a view of language as performative and communicative practices as mesopolitical acts to an attentiveness to the ways in which writers "tinker with authorized contexts, perspectives, and conventions of meaning making" and engage acts of difference through "iterations of dominant conventions as well as deviation from the norm" (Lu and Horner, "Introduction" 208). Questioning the significance of theories of performance and sameness-as-difference models in translingualism, Keith Gilyard, however, recommends that translingualists "document students' efforts" (288), analyzing the ways in which distinct populations of student writers negotiate language, diversity, and power. In fact, Gilyard gives a nod to historiography, returning to the 1960's and 1970's and calling for translingualists to "write histories of the translanguagers who organized at City College and other places" (288). Responding to Gilyard's call, but also working from selected tenets of translingualism, I am constructing the BLFI activists' collaborative writing as a site for translingual production. In my analyses, I am privileging a translingual interpretive framework that brings to light the ways in which the BLFI activists, as a community of writers, worked across a network of strategies, practicing how to use the linguistic and discursive resources they had available to them to attend to the material and rhetorical aspects of writing. In speaking of the rhetorical and material aspects of writing, I am referencing audience considerations, purposes, subjective and political commitments, and relations of power.

It is important to note that my investment in this recovered history project is both scholarly and personal. I grew up hearing the stories of my father's college activism as a member of the Black Liberation Front International, but one aspect of the stories that was always interesting to me was how the BLFI activists created the *Mazungumzo*, a journal of African Studies that was distributed domestically and internationally. For over thirty years, my father kept stored in the basement of his Detroit home an archive that contained copies of the *Mazungumzo* and the BLFI's reading materials

and political writings. In this regard, by recovering the history of the BLFI activists' political literacy education, I am substantiating what Wendy B. Sharer characterizes as the "scholarly standing of the affective domain" (55). Scholars in rhetoric and composition have increasingly acknowledged that our research agendas often emerge from our lived and affective experiences. It was the discovery of her grandmother's personal archives that led Sharer to investigate the ways in which study groups and letter-writing campaigns mediated women's participation in political affairs from 1915 to 1930. One of Sharer's goals was to "foster a desire in future scholars to explore the rhetorical practices of family members and friends, and, at the same time, to counteract the restrictions and assumptions that place family and friends—'personal relationships' and the affective domains that surround them—beyond the boundaries of valid research" (54-55).

Indeed, I have responded to Sharer's vision by returning to where it all began for me—with my father's stories and basement archives. Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan have advocated for expanding what they call a "narrow conception of archives" (4), and their edited collection documents how researchers in the fields of composition and literacy have taken up this advocacy by using regional and family archives for their data collection and analyses. Although I began my archival work by retrieving documents on the history of the BLFI and Black student activism at MSU from the university's Archives and Historical Collections,³ I also expanded what counts as archives by recovering a portion of the BLFI activists' political writings and reading materials from my father's basement archives. Additionally, I collected some of the BLFI activists' collaboratively written texts from Ernie Boone, the founder of the *Westside News*, a community newspaper that was a part of the Black press in Lansing. Several of the BLFI activists served as staff writers, editors, and production and distribution assistants for the *Westside News*. Boone, like my father, preserved in his Ann Arbor residence editions of the *Westside News* that featured articles written by the BLFI activists from 1968 to 1975.⁴

The history presented in this article is part of a larger project I have undertaken to recover the political literacies of the student-activists of the BLFI. To curate an understanding of the contexts of production for their critical reading and collaborative writing practices, I relied on a combination of (1) archival material; (2) interdisciplinary scholarship on C.L.R. James, the Black Campus movement of the sixties and seventies, and the Black radical tradition; and (3) analysis of transcripts of oral history interviews I conducted, including those with two members of the BLFI, Terry "Abdul" Johnson and Chui Karega; the two Kenyan graduate students who established The People's House, Maina wa-Kinyatti and Kamuyu Kang'ethe; and Ernie Boone, the founder of the *Westside News*. Although I am constructing the BLFI activists as a community of readers and writers who engaged literacy at The People's House for political aims, the recollections of Terry "Abdul" Johnson and Chui Karega are centered in this research because Johnson and Karega held leadership roles in the BLFI that directly informed and shaped their critical reading and collaborative writing practices. Johnson was chief editor for the *Westside News*, which is where the BLFI activists published most of their collaboratively written texts, and Karega was the BLFI's Minister of Information and senior editor of the *Mzungumzo*.

Brad Lucas makes a case for understanding oral history interviews as "interpersonal exchanges

developed with multiple perspectives and complex dialectical processes” (27). As Lucas points out, this approach to oral history deconstructs the role of the interviewer (researcher) as interrogator and imbues a sense of agency to interviewees (participants) by re-conceptualizing them as more than repositories of knowledge. This way of thinking about oral history interviews as “a looking together at something” (30) was essential in terms of uncovering the relationship between the BLFI activists’ political activism and their work on an organizational level as extracurricular readers and writers. In light of Karega and Johnson’s respective leadership positions in the organization, there were three important parts of my work in constructing a historical account of the BLFI activists’ political literacy education at The People’s House: (1) providing Johnson and Karega opportunities to reflect on and attribute meaning to the BLFI activists’ critical reading and collaborative writing practices; (2) looking for patterns of agreement in Karega and Johnson’s recollections; and (3) placing identifiable patterns of agreement in Karega and Johnson’s recollections in analytical conversation with selected examples of the BLFI activists’ critical reading and collaborative writing practices, the contexts of production for their political literacies, and scholarship on critical reading, collaborative writing, and translingual composition.⁵

“Our Own Personal Professor Emeritus”: C.L.R. James, Black Radicalism, and Critical Reading Praxis

In an article published in MSU’s campus newspaper, Terry “Abdul” Johnson, writing as a representative of the BLFI, critiqued the state of Black student activism at MSU:

The failures of black students to be a progressive force at MSU is not just a problem of outside forces . . . Until some black students or a large group of black students decide to seriously study student organizational and ideological problems, black students will remain subject to the whims of an educational system which is systematically opposed to the plight of black and other oppressed people. (“Lack of Organization Hurts Students”)

The radicalization of Black MSU students, Johnson continued theorizing, had to involve three elements, “concrete goals, objectives, and functional organizational definitions,” and these elements needed to include “something more than just the word freedom” (“Lack”). In short, Johnson was

“The reading groups that were organized at The People’s House were important mediums in their pursuit of these goals. More specifically, they functioned as a site where the BLFI activists developed a form of critical reading praxis that was tailored to their political aims and that baptized these student-activists into the fire of an intellectual tradition of Black radicalism in which the writings of C.L.R. James figured prominently.”

calling for a shift in political agency and practice among Black students at MSU. But instead of merely exhorting Black MSU students to adopt their proposed form of political activism, the BLFI activists wanted to assume a lead role in undertaking this shift towards a form of Black political radicalism that emphasized the integration of theory and practice.

The reading groups that were organized at The People’s House were important mediums in their pursuit of these goals. More specifically, they

functioned as a site where the BLFI activists developed a form of critical reading praxis that was tailored to their political aims and that baptized these student-activists into the fire of an intellectual tradition of Black radicalism in which the writings of C.L.R. James figured prominently.

C.L.R. James's political and intellectual legacy is transnational and extensive, including contributions to the fields of history, political theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and literature, to name a few. When he relocated to England in 1932, James became one of Leon Trotsky's leading spokespersons and was developing into what Robin D. G. Kelley describes as a "Marxist intellectual with Pan-Africanist leanings" (3). With the encouragement and support of Trotsky, in 1938 James left England for the US to begin a national speaking tour geared towards encouraging Black participation in labor politics. Although his speaking tour was supposed to be brief, growing disillusion with Trotskyism and his disputes with Trotsky over the "Negro Question" caused James to remain in the US, where his work was transformed from what Andrew J. Douglas describes as "a mission for Trotsky" into "more of an open-ended learning experience" (424). After Trotsky's assassination in 1940, it was clear that James was working from a Black radical tradition that Cedric Robinson, in *Black Marxism*, argues emerged as a critique of Western radicalism and a belief in the insufficiency of Marxist traditions. In terms of his written texts, James was recontextualizing aspects of Marxism-Leninism for his critical studies of the revolutionary character of Black struggle throughout the diaspora and on the African continent.

Although James was deported from the US in 1953, when he was allowed to re-enter the US in 1968, he found himself surrounded by a new generation of young Black radicals searching for ways to unite theory and practice to challenge racism, colonialism, and imperialism. This is how James first met Kimathi Mohammed, the BLFI's Executive Chairman, and that initial meeting served as the impetus behind James's interest in working with the BLFI activists. James continued to travel to Lansing for invited talks and presentations, forging a relationship with the BLFI activists over time; this was a critical positioning for James that provided a much needed service to the BLFI activists. "We worked very closely with C.L.R.," Johnson explained. "We knew that racism would keep us from getting all the education we needed from the university," Karega recalled, "and we really depended on those we knew were political and academic like C.L.R."

Here, Johnson and Karega are describing the BLFI activists' critique of the "normalized mask of whiteness" in higher education, a concept Ibram H. Rogers argues is important in terms of understanding the Black Campus Movement. Rogers historicizes how Black students of the sixties and seventies advocated for the reform of higher education by arguing that colleges and universities were fostering institutional climates that positioned White and Eurocentric ideas, peoples, and scholarship as the center of a universal standard curriculum. For the BLFI activists, one way to subvert the "normalized mask of whiteness" was to extend their education beyond the confines of the classroom by hosting lectures and talks delivered by Black scholars and activists such as Walter Rodney, the historian and Guyanese revolutionary who was working out of the University of Michigan at the time, Robert F. Williams, Stokely Carmichael, and of course, C.L.R. James. In particular, when the BLFI activists invited James to Lansing to speak or give a lecture, they considered it to be an extracurricular learning experience for their own political aims. Here's how Karega described those

engagements:

We went to C.L.R.'s school . . . We'd get a copy of something he wrote and we'd study it beforehand. It was school. He would come in and address a chapter and you were expected to have read prior and to be prepared on the subject and prepared to discuss the subject when the professor stood up. And that's what we did.

Those preparatory reading and study sessions took place at The People's House, primarily because of its operational character. The People's House evolved into a site of literacy education because it was a social and political space that was disengaged from the instructional and disciplining gaze of Whites and Whiteness. By reading and discussing James's writings in those preparatory sessions, the BLFI activists were introduced to the political nature of revisionist historiography, and they became adept at understanding political texts written by Black authors as rhetorical and epistemic. Additionally, by placing James's writings in conversation with the writings of Hegel and Leftist thinkers such as Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, the BLFI activists were able to negotiate variants of European and Western political philosophy in ways that rivaled their engagements with such concepts and ideas in academic contexts. Furthermore, by centering this kind of analysis in their critical reading praxis, the BLFI activists were empowered in their efforts to make sense of the distinctiveness of Black radicalism and the extent to which it could be used theoretically and organizationally for Black insurgency.

To illustrate, let us consider examples of the critical reading praxis that the BLFI activists adopted for the texts they were reading and studying in preparation for James's visits and lectures. One of the texts that the BLFI activists placed at the center of those sessions was James's *Notes on Dialectics*. In *Notes*, James was working through methods for using the concepts of Hegel's *Science of Logic* to understand the history of labor movements, to make sense of the spontaneity and organization of the working masses, and to speculate on the movements that might emerge as a result of proletarian spontaneity and self-organization. Even though James considered *Notes* to be one of his most important writings, it has been a text that contemporary scholars of James's work have tended to avoid—arguably because of its dense nature and the philosophic issues surrounding it. For scholars who have written about James's *Notes*, the main goals have been to interpret the relationship between James's dialectics and the concepts of Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. This was the kind of critical reading that the BLFI activists were doing in their preparatory reading groups at The People's House, and it was a critical reading praxis that was developed by the BLFI activists as a direct response to their engagements with European and Western philosophy and politics for their academic coursework. Karega explained:

Most of us were taking some heavy-hitting courses in philosophy, history, and political science. We were reading all kinds of stuff in these classes like Hegel and Marx . . . But there was a problem. We weren't satisfied that we could make those theories work for us and what we were doing. So we were more than anxious to hear from someone who could talk about the strengths and short falls of those theories and who had reworked those theories for the Black experience.

Karega's recollections suggest that there was recognition on the part of the BLFI activists of the canonical nature of the texts that they were reading for their academic courses. To engage these

canonical texts critically in ways that supported the BLFI's political work, the BLFI activists kept their understanding of James's Pan-African positionality at the forefront of their study of his writings, and according to Johnson and Karega, they were reading *Notes* in ways that that helped them do four things: (1) interpret the relationship between James's dialectics and the dialectical materialism of Marxism-Leninism; (2) understand the limitations and errors of orthodox Trotskyism; (3) work through Leninism; and (4) position the BLFI's work, theoretically and organizationally, in relation to this range of Leftist politics and a Black radical tradition that valued the possibilities of Black autonomous political movements.

This form of critical reading praxis required that the BLFI activists identify in the text James's interpretations of Hegel's categories of thought and assess the lines of reasoning James employed for applying those interpreted categories of Hegelian dialectics to politics. In this regard, in their reading of *Notes*, the BLFI activists were participating in a form of critical reading that Nancy Morrow defines in her work examining the role of reading in composition theory and pedagogy. Morrow articulates a view of reading that involves more than just basic comprehension. For example, two important aspects of Morrow's view of critical reading emphasize readers' ability "to assess bias, to articulate opposing viewpoints, to evaluate strengths and weaknesses, and to make judgments about texts" and "recognize when conventions are followed and when they are subverted" (466). So on one level, when Karega recalled that the BLFI activists were reading and studying *Notes*, working through how James's interpretations of Hegelian dialectics were informing and shaping his critique of Lenin's vanguard party, he was shedding light on how they were engaging in the kind of critical awareness and assessment work Morrow describes not only by recognizing the fact that James was subverting a conventional theory in Leninist politics but also by evaluating how and to what extent James's Pan-Africanist leanings were mediating factors in his argument that party politics had run their course in labor movements. On another level, when Johnson revealed that the BLFI activists were considering if and to what extent James's framework could be used to interpret historical Black autonomous movements, he was pointing to how they were engaging in a form of critical reading where they were making judgments about texts and evaluating strengths and weaknesses. In this instance, the BLFI activists were critically reading James's dialectics, assessing whether his framework could illuminate the kinds of contemporary challenges to State-capitalism that could emerge from the Black working class.

In addition to James's writings on dialectics, the BLFI activists were also reading and studying James's historiographical work on Black autonomous movements, and as Johnson recalled, this was a genre of writing and inquiry that they were eager to engage:

C.L.R. was rewriting our history. All I heard in school about us, our history, was how we were slaves and how bad it was for us and how we were oppressed and powerless . . . We're all reading this Marxist theory wanting so bad to just read and talk about something that told us how we have been the proletariat revolting. Even if it hadn't been successful, we wanted to read that and we wanted other people to know what our revolutionary potential was and could be. That's where we felt you had to begin — changing our understandings and Black people's understandings as a whole of what our revolutionary potential was and could

be. C.L.R.'s books spoke to us on those frustrations and desires.

Johnson is emphasizing the ways in which their reading of James's revisionist historiography provided the BLFI activists with opportunities to make sense of what Robin D. G. Kelley calls "history from below." James wrote texts such as *The History of Pan-African Revolt* to challenge misrepresentations about the revolutionary history of Black laborers (enslaved and free). "The only place where Negroes did not revolt," James once argued, "is in the pages of capitalist historians" ("Revolution" 339). In their reading groups at The People's House, the BLFI activists read and discussed *The History of Pan-African Revolt*, paying attention to how and why James was writing from the margins but presenting a challenge to traditional historiography by constructing a Marxian portrait of Black revolt that featured the self-mobilization efforts and self-emancipation processes of peoples of African descent. Johnson's memories evoke the BLFI activists' particular interest in James's revisionism of slave revolts in the US, but the BLFI activists also focused on placing in their rhetorical context other examples such as the labor strikes in Sierra Leone and South Africa and the period of strikes across the Caribbean, to name a few.

Lastly, as part of their engagements with critical reading, the BLFI activists also used James's writings to consider the relationship between rhetorical versatility and the work of the Black intellectual. The BLFI activists believed that James had a clear understanding of the functioning purpose and power of rhetorical versatility in terms of writing and the composition of written texts. "[James] didn't write *From Dubois to Fanon* in the same way that he wrote *State Capitalism and World Revolution*," Karega explained. "They were written for different reasons and for different audiences, so how he went about writing them had to be different, and we looked at that." Implicit in Karega's reflections is a form of critical reading praxis that Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior characterize as "reading civic texts for the means of rhetorical action, for the presence of tropes and topics, the signs of audience and authorial construction" (2). On the one hand, the BLFI activists were examining how James's *From Dubois to Fanon* mediated his efforts to chart the history of Pan-African politics and position his own work in relation to it. It was a text arguably written to a Pan-African audience—in particular, proponents of Pan-Africanism who would have had some familiarity with the subject matter. Hence, the text was argumentative but informal. That is, while James was making an argument about the richness of a tradition of Pan-Africanism that could be located historically and contemporarily, he didn't spend a lot of time in the essay performing a critical analysis of the theories and politics of Pan-Africanists such as Fanon and Dubois. Instead, the text reads as a narrative explanation of sorts of the theories, practices, politics, and personalities of some of the notable figures attached to Pan-Africanism. On the other hand, the BLFI activists were analyzing the implications of James writing *State Capitalism and World Revolution* in 1950 and in consultation with Raja Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, who both shared his disillusionment with Trotskyism and had formed with James an opposition State-Capitalist Tendency within the American Trotskyist movement. In the essay, James attempted to carve out a theory of State-capitalism that repudiated Trotskyism. His audience was arguably two populations of individuals—those who aligned themselves with Trotsky and his politics and those who were experiencing the same kind of disillusionment with Trotskyism. As such, the text is heavy in theory and critical analysis of the theoretical frameworks under review.

The comparative analysis of James's writings that I have reproduced and modeled here is demonstrative of what Karega and Johnson identified as an important component of the critical reading praxis the BLFI activists adopted in their reading and study sessions at The People's House. In this instance, they directed their attention towards the diverse contexts and authorial purposes that informed and shaped the tropes, arguments, and lines of reasoning James employed in each text.

“Coupled with the preparatory reading for James’s lectures that introduced them to revisionist historiography and provided them with opportunities to identify and assess the assumptions, complexities, and implications of arguments in written texts, this critical reading praxis constructed The People’s House as a site of literacy education that often rivaled the university contexts where they were engaging literacy for academic purposes.”

As we will see in the next section, James's attentiveness to a rhetorical versatility based on contextual awareness was a practice the BLFI activists adopted and privileged in their collaborative writing contexts. Coupled with the preparatory reading for James's lectures that introduced them to revisionist historiography and provided them with opportunities to identify and assess the assumptions, complexities, and implications of arguments in written texts, this critical

reading praxis constructed The People's House as a site of literacy education that often rivaled the university contexts where they were engaging literacy for academic purposes.

Collaborative Writing as Translingual Practice

As important as the reading groups were for the BLFI activists, it was also imperative that they take the theories and strategies for Black insurgency that they were reading and studying at The People's House and use them to *do* the work of the BLFI. The collaborative writing they were doing at The People's House was an integral part of the BLFI activists' pursuit of these objectives. Paul Lowry, Aaron Curtis, and Michelle Lowry argue that reactive writing occurs “when writers create a document in real time, reacting and adjusting to each other's changes and additions” (78). I would argue that the BLFI activists' collaborative writing was a form of reactive writing, functioning as a situated practice of rhetorical and political negotiation.

Reflecting on the character of their collaborative writing contexts, Karega summarized the ways in which negotiated considerations of their cultural and political commitments were determining factors for the language and discourse practices that the BLFI activists adopted for their collaboratively written texts:

With these papers, everybody added to it, refined it, edited it, the whole thing . . . We all had opinions on how it should all come together . . . There were times we knew we had to write in a way that made it plain for everyone . . . We also believed that African languages and names are important to Black culture, history, and just how we as Black people understand ourselves. Most of us learned Swahili . . . But we didn't think what was considered academic language was superior or something we as Black people have no claim to. If the oppressor's

language was what they considered academic language or proper English, whatever that is, then we wanted to also make the oppressor's language work for us and what we were trying to do in challenging oppression . . . We knew we could do that by showing we could use it or playing with it in ways that served our goals.

Karega's articulation of the BLFI activists' commitment to "making it plain" is a reference to a discursive practice about which Kimathi Mohammed, the BLFI's Executive Chairman, was particularly impassioned. Writing in an essay pamphlet entitled *Organization and Spontaneity*, Mohammed argued that "[e]very effort must be made to take theory out of the world of academics and to integrate it into the day-to-day struggles of the mass of the population where it rightfully belongs. That is: theoretical jargon must be broken down into understandable language and placed before the masses; and the ordinary man and woman must be encouraged to undertake theoretical work" (23). Mohammed's theory of political discourse required a commitment on the part of the revolutionary speaker and writer to theoretical simplicity

for the purpose of uniting the masses in the work of Black revolutionary struggle. In terms of their learning of Swahili, the BLFI activists were responding to their engagements with the theorizations of President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania—one of which was his promotion of Swahili as a language of African liberation and pride. The BLFI activists learned the East African language through intercultural contact with Maina wa Kinyatti and Kamuyu Kang-ethe at The People's House

“A close look at the BLFI activists’ use of theory discursively, their use of African languages rhetorically, and their experiments with conventional spelling will cast these student-activists as a community of writers who (1) understood their political activism and their collaborative writing as co-constitutive, (2) exercised the rhetorical versatility they learned from their reading of C.L.R James’s writings, and (3) recognized repetition and difference as linguistic and discursive meaning making acts and tactics for political dissent.”

and instructional aids selected by the two Kenyan graduate students that placed Swahili within the context of its grammatical, semantic, phonological, and cultural contexts. In short, the repertoire of linguistic and discursive practices that the BLFI activists' negotiated in their collaborative writing contexts affirmed the political importance of theoretical simplicity and African languages but also recognized the political value of repetition and creative experimentation with conventional language.

It is not a surprise, then, that the pages of their collaborative writing showcase the BLFI activists engaging in translingual practices, working across a network of linguistic and discursive practices. To illustrate, the following sections analyze two selected examples of texts that the BLFI activists collaboratively composed at The People's House. One text entitled "Africans Must Limit Fighting to Struggle for Their Own Liberation" was written for the BLFI's editorial column in the *Westside News*, the community newspaper with which the BLFI was actively involved in terms of writing, production, and distribution. The second text is one of several manifestos that the BLFI activists wrote in response to the controversy surrounding the African Studies Center on MSU's campus. A close look at the BLFI activists' use of theory discursively, their use of African languages rhetorically, and their experiments with conventional spelling will cast these student-activists as a community of

writers who (1) understood their political activism and their collaborative writing as co-constitutive, (2) exercised the rhetorical versatility they learned from their reading of C. L. R James's writings, and (3) recognized repetition *and* difference as linguistic and discursive meaning making acts and tactics for political dissent.

Making it Plain: Constructing Theory as Proletarian

The recollections of Karega and Johnson indicate that the BLFI activists used their editorial column in the *Westside News* as a viable medium for altering conditions that had stabilized social and political boundaries that limited contact between Black MSU students and residents of Lansing's Black communities. Ernie Boone, the founder of the *Westside News*, explained that one featured column of the newspaper was dedicated to the Lansing Black church community, while another column, "It's Your Thing," focused on social events and news in Lansing. Armed with their goal to develop and strengthen a political collective that included the BLFI activists and the *Westside News's* communally Black readership, "making it plain" was the discursive strategy that was privileged by the BLFI activists for their editorial articles. One of the tenets of translingualism views writers' linguistic and discursive choices as "shaping as well as shaped by the contexts of utterance and the social positionings of the writers, and thus having material consequences on the life and world we live in" (Lu and Horner, "Introduction" 208). I would argue that there was a definitive co-constitutive relationship between their efforts to proletarianize in their editorial articles the theories and arguments they were engaging in their reading groups and the work they were doing to politically organize across campus and community contexts, according to a form of political Blackness that emphasized the integration of theory and practice.

The article "Africans Must Limit Fighting to Struggle for Their Own Liberation" provides ample evidence of the contextual aptitude the BLFI activists employed when constructing theory as proletarian in these editorial articles. Johnson and Karega remembered that the writing goal for this particular article was twofold: to address the question of whether Black Americans should participate in the militaristic and political struggles of the United States and to illustrate the extent to which neocolonialism was at work in the United States. In addition to the writings of C.L.R. James, in their reading groups at The People's House, the BLFI activists were studying the writings of African revolutionaries and leaders such as Sekou Toure from Guinea and Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana. They were particularly drawn to postcolonial theory and Nkrumah's writings on neocolonialism. In a document drafted by The Third All-African People's Conference held March of 1961 in Cairo, neocolonialism was defined as "the survival of the colonial system in spite of formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries that become victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical [forces]" (reprinted in Wallerstein 260). Reflecting on Nkrumah's writings on neocolonialism, Johnson explained that his critiques of the postcolonial phenomenon were attractive to the BLFI activists because they believed that despite geographical differences there were similarities in terms of what Blacks in America and Africans on the continent were experiencing socially, economically, and politically: "We believed that here in the US, we [Black Americans] are also in a postcolonial situation; we are just in the West and not in

Africa and our colonizer has always resided and continues to reside right along with us in the same location and country.”

Consistent with their efforts to “make it plain” for the purpose of political unity and organizational affect, in “Africans Must Limit Fighting to Struggle for Their Own Liberation,” the BLFI activists refrained from using the kinds of theoretical jargon and theory-heavy lines of reasoning traditionally valued in the academy, instead taking care to paint a recognizable portrait of how neocolonialism was manifesting itself in the everyday lives of Black Americans through the military and police forces. They never used the word “neocolonialism,” nor did they cite any of Nkrumah’s writings or integrate into the text chains of discourse that writers such as Nkrumah drew upon to construct their analyses and critiques of the postcolonial phenomenon. Instead, the BLFI activists “made it plain” by using other methods of argumentation such as citing contextually relevant information that they believed was important to persuasively convey the tenets of neocolonialism to their readership.

On one front, they turned to the troubled history Black Americans have had with the United States military:

Afrikkans have participated in every war the United States has entered. We have fought and we have died to maintain this land. What we didn’t bargain for was the maintenance of the double standard, based on skin color, which the government and people of the United States of Amerikkka maintains. We have fought and died in all the wars, but we still do not have freedom, justice, or equality. The three basic rights of a human being.

We Afrikkans receive nothing for our sacrifices in the US military. Remember the late Brother Poindexter E. Williams? A 20 year young Afrikan who was killed in Viet Nam serving the interest of the US imperialist. The brother died in the Nam fighting for this country, but the brother’s family was prohibited from burying the dead soldier’s body in the same cemetery with white folks until they got a court injunction. The brother died for NOTHING!

Here, using tropes and experiences that the BLFI activists knew would, as Johnson recalled, “resound true” for their communally Black readership, they were illustrating methods designed to situate Black Americans as participants in policies and practices that were authorizing and sustaining hegemony and ultimately their own oppression. The BLFI activists were arguing here that despite participation in the militaristic and political struggles of the United States—struggles that the BLFI activists believed were imperialistic and capitalist-driven—social and institutionalized racism was denying Black Americans the same basic human rights (freedom, justice, and equality) that they were helping the US protect and maintain. Furthermore, the BLFI activists knew that the legal battles surrounding Poindexter Williams’s burial in the state-funded cemetery designated for servicemen killed in Vietnam had been featured regularly in the nightly news on television and publicized in newspapers across the country. The attention to unequal treatment in the mass media gave the BLFI activists an opportunity to illustrate one of the indirect methods that were being used to uphold racialized oppression and hegemony despite the abolition of the domestic colonial system that had subjugated Black Americans for centuries and despite the fact that progress in securing civil rights for Black Americans and abolishing the Jim Crow system was being made in the courts and in the legislative

branch. The denial of burial rights for Black soldiers was an example that the BLFI activists knew would provoke strong personal and political opinions amongst their communally Black readership.

On another front, the BLFI activists relied on three events that readers of the *Westside News* would also be familiar with—the urban rebellions of the sixties, the protest activism that had occurred at Mississippi Valley State College, and the corruption of urban police forces:

Notice that in the recent urban rebellions it was the division of the army that utilized most the bodies of our Afrikan brothers—the paratroopers. No planes used, but the paratroopers were sent. Afrikans sent to quell the just struggle of Afrikans. The white guards are unable to handle us Afrikan people. That too is why Afrikans are being used to murder Afrikans.

Remember when the brothers and sisters were protesting conditions at Mississippi Valley State College. When oppressive agents (police) were brought in to arrest the students, we found that the skin of these agents of the oppressor was Black.

Urban police forces are just extensions of the US military machine, present to protect the interest of the Europeans. The police will arrest an alcoholic who is injuring no one but himself but will not arrest the landlord who exploits the low income brother who rents from him, or the crooks who sell unsanitary meat and other foods to Afrikan people, nor will they arrest the men who really bring the dope into our community. They will arrest the dope, but the police don't touch the source that gives the dope to that brother.

In these three paragraphs, to support the BLFI activists' claim that Black Americans should refrain from participating in the US military and city police forces, they used these three events to continue demonstrating the tactics of neocolonialism, one of which is divide and conquer methods. Colonial rule is often sustained in postcolonial contexts by breaking up territories into smaller states that are unable to develop themselves and are dependent on colonial economic resources. Unity amongst the individual states is difficult if not impossible, and state agencies play an important role in this process by actively recruiting workers from subjugated populations who will enforce policies and practices that help colonial nations exert power and curb resistance efforts and any attempts at unity amongst these smaller states. Armed with this information, in these three paragraphs, the BLFI activists sought to demonstrate how these methods of neocolonialism were also manifesting themselves in Black communities in the United States through the work of the army, National Guard, and city police forces who were actively recruiting Black soldiers and officers.

Theory as a Discursive Weapon

When it came to their manifestos on the African Studies Center controversy on MSU's campus, the BLFI activists exercised a level of rhetorical versatility, determining that constructing theory as proletarian was not the strategy that would best fit their goals. One of the BLFI activists' first political initiatives on MSU's campus focused on placing the African Studies Center under Black leadership and control. In October of 1969, with representatives of PASOA, the BLFI activists took over and occupied for several hours the ASC while its staff composed of White faculty and scholars was attending a conference in Montreal. Three days after the occupation ended, the BLFI activists and the PASOA representatives met with the staff from the ASC, but the meeting was unsuccessful,

and the BLFI activists and PASOA representatives walked out. Over the next year, as they were confronted with a new set of challenges, the BLFI activists drafted a series of manifestos on the ASC controversy. First, the ASC's staff was challenging the argument that the ASC needed Black leadership. For example, resigning after pressure from the BLFI activists and PASOA representatives, the ASC's White director, Dr. Charles Hughes, made the following declaration in his statement of resignation: "I don't believe in color magic. There is nothing in the genes that allows a person to know more about an area. I think the African Studies Center is, by its name, concerned with events in Africa" ("Africanization" 2-3). Second, MSU's administration had made no progress in securing funding for the salary of a new director. The Plenary Group of the African Studies Center, which had a fair representation of Black and African students and faculty, had recommended Elliot Skinner, a Black professor of Anthropology from Columbia University. But using local and campus press, MSU's administration was citing anticipated reduction of Federal support and restricted state-funded resources as both the cause of the delay in hiring Skinner and to justify the steady cuts in the ASC's budget they had made since the BLFI activists and PASOA representatives issued their demands (Saddler). Responsively, the BLFI activists were challenging these official narratives by also giving statements to local and campus press (Saddler). But they knew they needed more. Whereas it was contextually appropriate and necessary for them to take theory out of the world of academics when writing for the *Westside News*, the BLFI activists knew they had to use theory against the academics on the opposing side of the power struggle for control over the ASC.

In terms of praxis, translingualism also views writers as "actively negotiating and constituting complex relations of power at the dynamic intersection of the social-historical (macro) and the personal (micro) levels" (Lu and Horner, "Introduction" 208). In their manifestos on the ASC, the BLFI activists' use of theoretical jargon and concepts privileged in academic contexts was an act of neither discursive imitation nor acquiescence to relations of power and conventional discursive practices. Rather, it was a mesopolitical discursive act in which postcolonial theory was used to mediate the BLFI activists' efforts to reverse power relations between MSU's administrators and the ASC's staff, on one side, and Black and African faculty and students on the other side. Integrating theories of neocolonialism into their manifestos on the African Studies Center enabled the BLFI activists to construct the ASC's work as antithetical to and exploitive of the discipline of African Studies and to position Black and African faculty and students as the correct and viable leadership option for the Center.

For example, in November of 1969, the BLFI issued a manifesto to the ASC's staff and MSU administrators, arguing their position on the ASC and proposing a seven part programmatic approach "to eventually halt racism and neocolonialism stemming from the seeds planted by the African Studies Center at MSU." This time they were using the word "neocolonialism" and patterns of discourse that formed the basis of critiques of the postcolonial phenomenon. At one point in the manifesto they also wrote:

African Studies in the United States is harmoniously integrated into Western imperialism. It is nothing more than scientific neocolonialism. African Studies centers are institutionalized indoctrination mechanisms utilized to perpetuate racism and legitimize colonialism, old

and new. Governmental agencies, major corporations, foundations and Western ideologies are the influencing forces that shape the ideological contents of research about Africa.

The African Studies profession has historically been overwhelmingly white. Blacks have never been strongly encouraged and given the opportunity to enter the profession. As a result of this white domination of the field, the myths about Africans and the reinforcers of these myths, i.e., terms like primitive, pagan, savage, tribal, etc., have never been destroyed.

The longevity of these myths has also effectively divided the peoples of African descent.

As Karega explained, in this excerpt the BLFI activists were theorizing how and to what extent the research of White scholars in African Studies was being used to continue the subjugation of peoples of African descent through ideological and institutional practices that were authorized by the collaborative endeavors of Western educators and state and corporate powers. First, African Studies was explicitly named as an extension of neocolonialism—a form of “scientific neocolonialism.” Writing in 1967, Johann Galtung defined scientific colonialism as the process “whereby the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself” (13). Continuing his theorization of the term, Galtung warned that “Social science knowledge about a small nation in the hands of a big power is a potentially dangerous weapon [contributing] to the asymmetric patterns already existing in the world because it contributes to manipulation in the interests of big powers” (14). Although the BLFI activists called it “scientific neocolonialism,” clearly in this excerpt they were constructing a parallel with the notion of scientific colonialism. Second, to give concrete appearances to neocolonial practices tied to African Studies centers, the BLFI activists used discourse markers to construct the centers and their work within the context of terminology and concepts specific to theories of neocolonialism. Here, we are talking about concepts such as “Western imperialism,” “institutionalized indoctrination” and “colonialism” and anthropological terminology such as “primitive,” “pagan,” “savage,” and “tribal.” During the period, some scholars—Black and White—were theorizing these anthropological terms as demonstrative of what Nkrumah, in critiquing colonial education, described as “the propositions and presuppositions of the colonial epoch” (“The African Genius” 14).

Consistent with their efforts to use theory as a discursive weapon, in this manifesto the BLFI activists also made another move that they hadn’t made in their articles for the *Westside News*. They cited the theories of White scholars who were also critical of the neocolonialist practices that the BLFI activists saw at work in the discipline of African Studies. Again, this was not a mere reproduction of a conventional academic writing practice, nor was it a mimicking of or bowing to what’s traditionally valued in the academy. The meaning Karega attributed to this citation practice renders it important in terms of supporting their efforts to gain power and reassert the leadership of peoples of African descent in the discipline of African Studies. In this regard, it was a translingual act. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu’s translingual approach considers language practices within a spatial-temporal framework—the time, space, and place of their production. Such a framework enables Horner and Lu to view *every* language act—both repetition and deviation from the norm—as meaning making activities and sites for renegotiation, reinvention, reform, and reconstruction (“Translingual” 588). I am arguing here that the BLFI activists’ direct quoting of White scholars’ critiques of neocolonialism

in African Studies was a site where they were reworking the scholarship of their White allies in a new context for the BLFI's purposes and objectives.

For example, at one point in the manifesto, the BLFI activists quoted from the theorizations of White anthropologist Stanley Diamond, who was a member of a radical group of scholars in the African Studies Association that called itself the African Research Group. In the same year that the BLFI activists took over and occupied MSU's African Studies Center, the African Research Group published *African Studies in America: The Extended Family*, which summarized their critiques of the discipline. This was a text that in its Introduction characterized African Studies in the US as "a child of the American Empire . . . developed to meet the needs of ever-expanding US corporate and governmental penetration in Africa . . . [and] represent[ing] a clear and present danger to legitimate African aspirations for freedom, justice and revolutionary change" (1). The BLFI activists quoted directly from Diamond's contributions to the publication, which positioned African Studies as an institutional tool for the scientific neocolonialism the BLFI activists described earlier in the manifesto:

We realize and agree with Stanley Diamond that Africa "has been a laboratory for too many American careers; too many papers and books are simply status symbols in the social system, the social struggle of the domestic academy, shaped by that system and couched in its limited and evasive language . . . African Studies has been careerist or merely fashionable; concern has been less with the subject of study, with the condition, needs and potential of African people, than with the abstract problems that qualified a student as an academic expert or Africanist; the latter certification presumably indicating a certain control over data but by no means guaranteeing the application of general intelligence to the problems of the subcontinent.

In this passage, the BLFI activists were constructing Diamond—and other scholars who were challenging the hegemonic and exploitive practices of the discipline of African Studies—as allies in their power struggle against the ASC's staff and MSU administrators. In addition to their own critiques that they articulated in the manifesto, the iteration of Diamond's counter-theories served as institutional backing for the BLFI activists as the ASC's staff and MSU's administrators continued to delimit the authority of the BLFI, the representatives from PASOA, and even the small group of allied Black and African faculty on MSU's campus.

Satiric Misspelling as a Tactic for Political Organizing and Dissent

Whereas the versatility the BLFI activists exercised in their use of theory discursively emphasizes the agentive character of their collaborative writing practices, another compelling aspect of their collaborative writing practices is the rhetorical agency they employed in their use of nonconventional spelling as a tactic for political organizing and dissent. If we return to the cited passages from the article "Africans Must Limit Fighting to Struggle for Their Own Liberation," one thing that stands out is the BLFI activists' use of satiric misspelling with the words "Amerikkka" and "Afrika." During the period, this was a linguistic practice that was adopted by some Black activists. It would be a mistake, however, to draw the conclusion that the BLFI activists' use of satiric misspelling in this article for the

Westside News was lacking in sophistication—a mere valorization and appropriation of a linguistic strategy that other Black radicals were using in their texts. Listen to Karega’s contextualization of the BLFI activists’ use of satiric misspelling in their editorial articles:

We spelled America with three “k’s” to represent the oppressiveness and the lynchings and enslavement and everything else Black people have been victimized by in the United States. Spelling can be political. We live in the West and we learn our ABC’s and how to spell based on the Western world. But there are different spellings for just about every place on Earth. Africa was initially spelled with a “k” instead of a “c.” So we were trying to let people know that there have been modifications to us. Everything about us has been changed to satisfy the way certain people talk, spell, everything . . . We wanted people reading to challenge us and say “You spelled Africa wrong.” And they did. You know what that does though? It starts the conversation. Now I can talk to you about Africa. It’s a door-opener, a starter. So now we’re talking because of how I spelled Africa.

It is clear through Karega’s comments that the BLFI activists’ use of satiric misspelling was a political practice in terms of intent and desired effect. But more interestingly, Karega’s comments suggest that the BLFI activists’ satiric misspelling of the words “Africa” and “America” was indeed a form of translanguaging practice.

On the one hand, the BLFI activists’ replacement of the “c” in “America” with “kkk” is demonstrative of a practice that Geneva Smitherman advocated for when she described power in language as the ability “to choose rhetorical strategies, not grammatical ‘niceties,’ for moving the audience in the direction desired” (91). The BLFI activists were addressing a communally Black readership and were guided by their efforts to write into existence a political Blackness that was radical in theory and practice. Although they did not shun using Standard Written English conventions in this editorial article, by tinkering with conventional spelling, the BLFI activists were repudiating the “mania of correctness” (*Talkin* 130) that Smitherman and others were working within and against professional organizations to challenge during the period. Their goal was to adapt linguistic symbolism tied to the Klu Klux Klan to construct a subversive portrait of Americanism in which White Supremacy is structurally and systemically embedded in the fabric of American life. On the other hand, in his reflections Karega, in his own way, was echoing Alastair Pennycook’s theory of language sedimentation. Pennycook argues that “the notion of systematicity embedded in the concept of grammar is itself a product of repeated social action” (46). In this sense, as Karega pointed out, the structures and rules that underlie English used in Western contexts are the products of repetitious social practices and cultural conditioning. But in localities outside of Western contexts, where social practices and cultural conditioning have produced different languages, dialects, and linguistic rules and structures, European and Western hegemony and imperialism have altered not only these languages, dialects, and linguistic rules and structures, but also their respective contexts, cultures, and peoples. The BLFI activists’ reworking of the spelling of “Africa” by removing the “c” and reinserting the “k” was a challenge to and subversion of these kinds of hegemonic and imperialist processes and practices—for themselves and for their targeted audience. In other words, by reconstructing—and in a sense restoring—African and diasporic meanings, contexts, and

identities through their use of satiric misspelling, the BLFI activists believed that they could not only encourage political dialogue between themselves and Black communities in Lansing but also bring to life, in a public discursive space, a version of the radicalized Black student activist that they wanted to produce at MSU.

Code-Meshing for Pan-African Unity and Affect

In this last section, I want to draw attention to a code-meshing practice the BLFI activists adopted, in which they meshed English with Swahili. Code-meshing refers to the simultaneous use of two or more languages or dialects in a single act of speech or writing (Canagarajah; Young and Martinez). For the BLFI activists, their code-meshing was not a dominant feature in their collaboratively written texts. Instead, more often than not they were integrating short, declarative sentences written in Swahili into a text that was predominately composed in Standard Written English. An example of this code-meshing practice can be seen in that same manifesto on the ASC controversy that the BLFI activists issued in November of 1969. One of the paragraphs in the manifesto is a declaration of their intent to remain diligent in their efforts to place the ASC under Black leadership and control. This declaration was written in both English and Swahili:

No amount of repression will stop our struggle against imperialism, neocolonialism, and racism. Our struggle will continue until our people are free. Should our generation die in the course, another generation shall rise up to the historic task of liberating our people. Ours is to fight to the end. *Lazima tutashihda bila Shaka!*

Loosely translated, “*lazima tutashihda bila Shaka*” means “we must prevail course.” When I asked Karega about this code-meshing practice, he characterized it as what Suresh Canagarajah describes as a voicing strategy. Reporting on his graduate student’s code-meshing practices in a literacy narrative assignment, Canagarajah defines voicing strategies for code-meshing as “basing communication on one’s own positionality and making textual spaces for one’s linguistic strengths and resources” (404). For the BLFI activists, writing this paragraph in both English and Swahili—conveying their diligence to the struggle in both English and Swahili—was a strategy to construct for their audience a sense of unity among the BLFI activists and the representatives from PASOA. Recall that their work in placing the ASC under Black leadership was a collaborative endeavor with PASOA. Also recall the important relationships that were forged between the BLFI and PASOA and the translingual engagements that were taking place at The People’s House, particularly surrounding the BLFI activists’ learning of Swahili. Through this code-meshing act, the BLFI activists were presenting to the ASC’s staff and MSU’s administrators a Pan-African unified front.

By leaving the sentence written in Swahili untranslated, the BLFI activists were also voicing their agency as gatekeepers of the discipline of African Studies. The BLFI activists and PASOA representatives were always advocating for an increase in course offerings in Third World languages, particularly Pan-African languages, and they were consistently petitioning for the recruitment of faculty who could teach these courses. Moreover, the BLFI activists believed that the White scholars of the ASC had made very little effort to understand the cultural, linguistic, and political contexts that needed to inform and shape the research they were doing on the African continent. Karega

reflected on how they perceived the scholarship produced by the ASC:

We saw their scholarship as very restrictive. If you can think about how the study of Black people in the United States has been done, for example, how sociologists were always coming into Black communities—and still coming—and always coming up with these ideas. That's just how we saw the work they were doing on the African continent. Folk who called themselves scholars were just parroting and helping neocolonial African governments.

In short, the untranslated sentence written in Swahili was a means for “calling out,” as Karega explained, the ASC's staff and MSU's administrators by confronting them with their Otherness in relation to African culture and worldviews and in terms of the discipline of African Studies.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the history of the BLFI activists' political literacy education at The People's House highlights the continued importance of revisionist historiography, positioning these student-activists beyond discourses of basic writing and literacy remediation and providing insight into the role that politically-oriented critical reading and collaborative writing played in the literacy development of a community of Black student-activists in the late sixties and early seventies. Of course, there is more to be recovered and shared. Kimathi Mohammed, the BLFI's Executive Chairman, composed a body of written work that was widely read and circulated, particularly among political groups tied to the radical wings of Detroit labor politics in the sixties and seventies. Also compelling are the contexts for literacy education that Ernie Boone, the founder of the *Westside News*, constructed for the BLFI activists to learn the art of radical Black journalism. Boone, I would argue, functioned as what Deborah Brandt calls a sponsor of literacy. Finally, the BLFI activists' work with the *Mazungumzo* journal and their letter-writing activities in which they were writing proactively and responsively to MSU's administrators, need to be explored in more depth. These kinds of activities broaden the scope, shedding light on the BLFI activists' extracurricular engagements with academic scholarship and epistolary traditions.

But there are other implications for this recovered history that move us beyond the realm of historiography and beyond inquiries into how such a history can inform and shape the work we do in contemporary literacy and composition classrooms. When we encounter the public rhetorics of educators and administrators such as Lewis Mayhew and Geoffrey Wagner, it is readily apparent—or at least it should be—how and to what extent racist and classist ideologies and practices were forming the basis of those rhetorics. But in this current political moment, where Black students are proclaiming and demanding—not asking—that Black Lives Matter on and off campus, such rhetorics are being contemporized by some college administrators, educators, and students. The political activism of Black students is currently confronted with questions and critique, particularly in terms of its exigence and relevance to their experiences as college learners and their development as readers, writers, and critical thinkers and inquirers. Moreover, opposition has mounted against two of the top demands issued by Black students on college campuses across the country, which have focused on an increase in Black faculty and the construction of exclusively Black spaces and “safe spaces” on college campuses. The BLFI activists' political literacy education at The People's House

illustrates the importance of nonacademic political spaces to populations of students who often—still—are positioned on and regulated to the margins of academia. These are sites where Black students are carving out space so they can negotiate, define, and enact their political identities and practice literacy for political aims. The important role that C.L.R. James played in terms of the BLFI activists' emerging politics and their development as readers and writers also highlights the importance of relationships between Black students and Black faculty, activists, and community organizers. This is the kind of mentorship that often doesn't show up in the pages of CVs and resumes but is no less important, not only in terms of the ongoing development of Black students but also in terms of our development as Black scholars, educators, and activists.

Voices from the past are always integral to understanding our present conditions and future possibilities. If we are open—and ready—to listen.

NOTES

¹Language deficit theories posited the pathology of non-standard dialects, suggested nonstandard dialects inhibit the cognitive development of their users, and argued the inadequacy of nonstandard dialects in comparison to Standard English.

²Eventually the BLFI evolved from solely a Black student organization into a community organization. Its headquarters was called the Marcus Garvey Institute, centrally located in Lansing, Michigan. With Kimathi Mohammed, the BLFI's Executive Chairman, leading the way, the political cadre working out of the Garvey Institute collaborated with the Peoples' Action Committee (PAC), a component of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). The political cadre was also active in the development of the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), a distinctly Pan-African and internationalist organization. For more on the ALSC, see a compilation of the organization's primary documents in Appendix B-14 through B-20 in Modibo M. Kadalie, *Internationalism, Pan-Africanism, and the Struggle of Social Classes*. Savannah: One Quest Press, 2000, 621-668.

³The bulk of material I uncovered in MSU's Archives and Historical Collections was located in the Ruth S. Hamilton Collection. Ruth Hamilton joined MSU's Department of Sociology in 1968 and was a core faculty member in the African Studies Center and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. As the director of MSU's African Diaspora Research project for seventeen years, part of Ruth Hamilton's work also involved pushing against asymmetrical power relations, hegemonic values, and selective practices to create space for research that makes present the unmediated voices and perspectives of African peoples on the continent and throughout the diaspora. Hamilton's collection contains materials on university diversity programs and affirmative action at MSU, case studies of MSU conflicts and protests, newspaper clippings, academic papers written by Hamilton, and a small compilation of files on MSU's Black student organizations.

⁴The documents collected from Karega and Boone's personal archives include a diverse range of materials that catalogue and provide insight into the BLFI activists' reading and writing activities. In the Works Cited, the documents cited in this research that are directly related to or representative of their critical reading and collaborative writing practices at The People's House are listed.

⁵The first component of the oral history portion of this project was individual interviews in which I prompted interviewees' recollections by asking open-ended questions about the BLFI's political activism and the reading and writing practices that supported this activism. I conducted follow-up interviews using a tier of questions that I designed after transcribing this first set of interviews and interpreting the information gained. For example, it was during the first set of interviews that I learned about the kinds of reading and writing activities that were important to the BLFI activists' political work. During the first set of interviews, The People's House was also cited as an important space for the BLFI activists' critical reading and collaborative writing activities. Hence, in follow-up interviews with Karega and Johnson, I posed questions that specifically prompted them to reflect upon the BLFI activists' critical reading and collaborative writing practices and the contexts of production for a selected sampling of their written texts.

WORKS CITED

- Africa Research Group. *African Studies in America: The Extended Family*. Cambridge: African Research Group, 1969. Print.
- "Africanization History of the African Studies Center at Michigan State University." 12 Nov. 1970. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- "Africans Must Limit Fighting to Struggle for Their Own Liberation." *The Westside News* (1971). Print.
- Bazerman, Charles, and Paul Prior. Introduction. *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Ed. Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004. 1-10. Print.
- BLFI Manifesto. Nov. 1969. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- Boone, Ernie. Oral History Interview. 2 Sept. 2012.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. "Code-meshing in Academic Writing: Identifying Teachable Strategies of Translanguaging." *The Modern Language Journal* 95.3 (2011): 401-417. Print.
- Douglas, Andrew J. "Democratizing Dialectics with C.L.R. James." *The Review of Politics* 70.3 (2008): 420-41. Print.
- Executive Board of the BLFI. Preamble for BLFI Meeting with Black Residents of Owen Hall. 27 April 1970. Notebook document.
- Galtung, Johan. "Scientific Colonialism." *Transition* 30 (1967): 10-15. Print.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 45.1 (1994): 75-92. Print.
- Gilyard, Keith. "The Rhetoric of Translingualism." *College English* 78.3 (2016): 284-89. Print.
- Hamilton, Ruth, and Sharon Peters. "Black Students at Michigan State University: A Preliminary Research Report, June 1973." Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- Horner, Bruce. "The 'Birth' of 'Basic Writing.'" *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*. Eds. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu. Urbana: NCTE, 1999. 3-29. Print.
- James, C.L.R. *A History of Pan-African Revolt*. Washington: Drum and Spear, 1969. Print.
- . *From Dubois to Fanon*. Detroit: Facing Reality, 1967. Print.
- . *Notes on Dialectics*. Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co. 1948. Print.
- . "Revolution and the Negro." See Johnson, J.R.
- James, C.L.R. in collaboration with Raja Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs. *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. Detroit: Facing Reality, 1969. Print.
- Johnson, J.R. "Revolution and the Negro." *New International V* (1939): 339-43. Print.
- Johnson, Terry "Abdul." Oral History Interview. 2 Sept. 2012.
- . Oral History Interview. 18 Nov. 2012.
- . "Lack of Organization Hurts Black Students." *State News*. 16 May 1970. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- Kang'ethe, Kamuyu. Oral History Interview. 7 Oct. 2012.
- Karega, Chui. Oral History Interview. 17 Oct. 2012.

- . Oral History Interview. 23 May 2013.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. Introduction. *A History of Pan African Revolt*. By C.L.R. James. Oakland: PM, 2012. 1-33. Print.
- Kinyatti, Maina. Oral History Interview. 25 May 2013.
- Kirsch, Gesa E., and Liz Rohan. *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.
- Logan, Shirley Wilson. *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.
- Lowry, Paul Benjamin, Aaron Curtis, and Michelle Rene Lowry. "Building a Taxonomy and Nomenclature of Collaborative Writing to Improve Interdisciplinary Research and Practice." *Journal of Business Communication* 41.1 (2004): 66-99. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*. Eds. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu. Urbana: NCTE, 1999. 30-55. Print.
- . "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence." *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*. Eds. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu. Urbana: NCTE, 1999. 105-16. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan, and Bruce Horner. "Introduction: Translingual Work." *Translingual Work in Composition*. Spec. issue of *College English* 78.3 (2016): 207-18. Print.
- . "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency." *College English* 75.6 (2013): 582-607. Print.
- Lucas, Brad. "Oral History's Turn: Archival Thinking and the Divine Views of the Interdialectic." *Issues in Writing* 17.1/2 (2007/2008): 25-49. Print.
- Mohammed, Kimathi. *Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application to the Black Movement in the U.S. Today*. Lansing: Marcus Garvey Institute, 1974. Print.
- Morrow, Nancy. "The Role of Reading in the Composition Classroom." *JAC* 17.3 (1997): 453-72. Print.
- Moss, Beverly J., ed. *Literacy across Communities*. Cresskill: Hampton, 1994. Print.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *Africa Must Unite*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1963. Print.
- . *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization*. New York: Monthly Review, 1964. Print.
- . *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1966. Print.
- . "The African Genius." Opening of the Institute of African Studies. Accra. 26 Oct. 1963. Speech.
- . "The People's Party." *National Assembly 12 June 1965*. London: African Publication Society, n.d. Print.
- Pennycook, Alastair. *Language as a Local Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Zed, 1983. Print.
- Rogers, Ibram H. *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Jean C. Williams. "History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies." *A Usable Past: CCC at 50: Part 2*. Spec. issue of *College Composition and Communication* 50.4 (1999): 563-584. Print.
- Saddler, Jeanne. "Blacks Hit Inaction by 'U.'" *State News*. Dec. 3 1970. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East

- Lansing, Print.
- . "Two Groups Blast African Center." *State News*. 30 Oct. 1969. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- . "'U' Blacks Reiterate Demands for Center." *State News*. 4 Dec. 1970. Ruth Simms Hamilton Collection, UA.17.269, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, East Lansing. Print.
- Sharer, Wendy B. "Traces of the Familiar: Family Archives as Primary Source Material." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 47-55. Print.
- Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "Black Power is Black Language." *Black Culture: Reading and Writing Black*. Ed. Gloria M. Simmons and Helene Hutchinson. New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1972. 91. Print.
- . *Talkin That Talk*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Africa, the Politics of Unity: An Analysis of a Contemporary Social Movement*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967. Print.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti, and Aja Y. Martinez, eds. *Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy and Performance*. Urbana: NCTE, 2011. Print.