

Black Institutions in the USA

An interview with Maisha Winn

by Annabelle Allouch

How did African-Americans attempt to overturn the relations of racial domination in the United States? From the post-war period onwards, by creating cultural and educational institutions specific to their community, which are still useful today in the fight against discrimination.

Maisha T. Winn is Chancellor's Leadership Professor at the University of California, Davis, and codirector (with Torry Winn) of UC Davis's Transformative Justice in Education (TJE) Center. Her program of research examines the ways in which teachers and/or adult allies for youth in schools and in out-of-school contexts practice "justice" in the teaching of literacy.

Winn was named an American Educational Research Association Fellow in 2016, received the William T. Grant Foundation Distinguished Fellowship in 2014, and received the American Educational Research Association Early Career Award in 2012. She has authored *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Schools* (2007, published under "Fisher"), *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (2009, published under "Fisher"), *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (2011), and most recently *Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education through Restorative Justice* (2018), and is coeditor of *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities* (with Django Paris).

Maisha T. Winn's research spans a wide variety of understudied settings including her earlier work on the literate practices extant in bookstores and community organizations in the African American community to her most recent work in settings where adolescent girls are incarcerated. Her work is multidisciplinary in that she examines the cognitive dimensions of the literate practices, the micro-level/interactional processes through which knowledge is constructed in these settings, and the socialization functions that take place through both peer relation

and adult-youth relations as they emerge in these various institutions. And the substance of Winn's investigations further illuminate the roles that these institutions play within the larger cultural-historical development of racially diverse and low income communities—including populations of Dominican, Puerto Rican, Columbian and African American descent.

***Books and Ideas:* Your program of research has taken you on a journey in many places, both in school and in out-of-school settings. Black owned and operated bookstores, coffeehouses and cultural centers, as well as high school poetry classes and youth detention centers. How would you connect the dots of this journey?**

Maisha Winn: I'm trained in a field called language literacy and culture, which is really a marriage, between anthropology, many of us are trained as ethnographers, sociolinguistics and educational research. We think a lot about literacy as a social practice, and primarily I've been concerned with how people of African descent develop literate trajectories. What are the spaces in which people of African descent have enjoyed participating in writing, reading, thinking, speaking and activities that pertain to literacy?

This work has taken me in myriad places, both in school and out of school, mostly because schools have not always had the capacity to support the literate practices of people of African descent in this country, in the United States. And so often, many of us will look to places that we call chosen literacy spaces, or what I've called in my work participatory literacy communities, which are spaces in which people of African descent have made decisions and been strategic about engaging in reading, reading groups, writing groups, coming together for poetry speakeasies.

Maybe these places are in absentia, informal institutions. Maybe they are when they are denied access to formal institutions. And sometimes it may be that what the formal institutions are offering is substandard, and there has to be another place to grow and cultivate their skills. So my earlier work really looked at black owned and operated bookstores, the kinds of author events that they have.

But I didn't just interview people who were sharing their work, the authors themselves. I was really careful to interview and engage people who were in the audience, because one of the things that I learned in these participatory literacy spaces is that people in the audience are equally as important as the alleged speaker or the

person who's on stage or the person who folks have come to see, and that the person who's on stage, so to speak, has this blurred.

There's a blurred boundary between the so-called audience and the speaker and how important it is to have that relationship in these participatory literacy communities or chosen literacy spaces for people of African descent. I've also spent time in youth detention centers and the urban southeast, working with a women focused theater company who worked with incarcerated girls, teaching them playwriting and performance.

And I was really curious to know how these girls came to see themselves as writers, as writers, as playwrights, and how arts helped them reposition themselves to a public that was either wary of them or just had no understanding of what it was like to be in these girl's shoes. And it was really during that six year ethnography that my work transitioned because if you've ever stepped foot into a youth detention center, which essentially is a jail for children, you're really transformed by what you see.

First of all, it's confusing. I didn't know that many of these spaces existed in the way that they did. And I learned from these girls and from their families that many of them started at school that day and thought they were going to have a normal day. And an incident that took place at school ended up involving the police, which ended up involving the justice system.

So imagine going to school in the morning and then being in a youth detention center in the evening. And this incredible woman focused theater company in the Southeast created these playwriting workshops to give girls this opportunity to think about what it would mean, to write a play about their lived experiences and also stage those plays. And that's when my work started, really going into the area of youth justice, social justice, transformative justice and possibilities, because I could no longer just separate out my desire as a researcher to think about the different ways in which people acquired literacy or became literate or began to see themselves or define themselves as literate.

I couldn't divorce that from the fact that all of this was transpiring in a justice involved building in a youth detention center where these young people were either awaiting trials or awaiting some other person to make a decision about whether or not they were going to get to return home or if they were going to have to spend more time incarcerated.

And that was a huge turn for me and my work. A lot of people ask, how does a language, literacy and culture scholar become interested and invested in issues around justice? And that was really my trajectory.

***Books and Ideas:* Your current research, and forthcoming book called *Futuring Black Lives, Independent Black Institutions and the Literary Imagination*, which is going to be published by Vanderbilt University Press. It explores the fascinating history of independent black institutions established during the black arts movement 1965 to 75 or thereabouts, who were these institution builders? What were their objectives? And what can we learn from their work?**

Maisha Winn: One of the things that I love about the story of black institution builders who established schools, food co-ops, performance spaces, publishing houses, type setters throughout the black arts and black power movements is that they were everyday people. They were mostly concerned parents who were concerned about the public school system and the kinds of education that their children might be inheriting, that weren't using that terminology anti-black at the time.

But to think about current discourses, I would say anti-blackness in schools. These were artists who believe that art was not just for art's sake, but they believe that art was for the people's sake, which is a quote from Haki R. Madhubuti, one of the primary institution builders in my book featuring *Black Lives*, many of them were poets.

And it's really interesting that several of the independent black institutions throughout the country were started by poets. Poets were using their status as poets, their popularity, as well as their ability to draw people in with their words, to actually incite action. And so they really believed that, to borrow from the poet Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks, that words must work.

It wasn't good enough just to perform poetry and read literature, just to enjoy it, but that it should actually lead to action. It should lead to mobilizing people, galvanizing movements. So the institution builders who are center to my story are the men and women who started the Institute of Positive Education in Chicago, Illinois.

The Institute of Positive Education was established in 1969, about two years after Haki R. Madhubuti started the Third World Press, which is the oldest publishing house in the country still in existence in Chicago.

Many things I felt we can learn from them. The first thing that I feel we can learn from black institution builders is the intergenerational nature of teaching and learning that they're they really blur the lines between ages and generations.

They had other children in their laps because that's the way the village function. Another thing that I think is really interesting about these black institution builders is the way that they saw into the future. They saw the need for the institutions to have many different tentacles, like when you think about what we call wraparound services in education. So in these institutions, they had their schools, they often had food co-ops, they had healthy eateries.

Many of them were thinking about being vegetarian and vegan. And the late sixties and early seventies, they also saw the need to produce their own books periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets to make sure that people of African descent had literature accessible to them. There was a movement to get books and poetry into the hands of everyday people. And so you had people like Dudley Randall who started Broadside Press in Detroit, and Dudley Randall would publish these poems on a broad, maybe about this size.

And the idea was that you could fold a poem. It could be in your purse, even if you're at a bus stop waiting to go to work, or that it could be in your back pocket. And that literature and libraries and books were not just for people who had money or luxurious, for people who had time to sit around and read, but that you could be doing it even as you move along and go along.

So I would say that the primary thrust of these institution builders was to also demonstrate that literacy, literature, being literate and literary were a part of the culture. They were part and parcel of the movement.

***Books and Ideas:* Your work also draws upon the history of these institutions to help design a better education for future generations of black youth. Can you tell us more about the pedagogical and public policy implications of this historical work?**

Maisha Winn: I refer to my work as historiography for the future. I'm a trained ethnographer and I often refer to myself as a historian by necessity. Many of the current education conundrums that our U.S. public school system is dealing with are part and parcel of our histories. The history of enslaved people of African descent

throughout the United States denied access to schools and then denied access to equity in schools.

And currently we still have a great deal of segregation in our school systems throughout the country. We also have a lot of segregation within classrooms, so we might have some students in AP and some students tracked in lower tract classes who never have access to some of the honors classes or high achieving math courses. So historiography for the future begs the question: what are those historical signals?

Any sort of information that we have that help us understand and think about what's happening in the present. But they can also give us information about how we might move forward. So it's really a continuum of past, present and future. I also consider myself a trained futurist. I've done a lot of partnering with the Institute for the Future, and what I mean by that is that I think about ten, 20 years out, what will education look like for everyone in the United States?

But I've been focused on a project, thinking about the educational futures of black children. That project has been launched with my center, the Transformative Justice and Education Center. And right now we're focused on California, but we certainly have plans to think about it moving outwards. So these historical signals that I mentioned are really important because many of the issues that the black institution builders were grappling with in the late sixties and early 1970s, unfortunately continue to be relevant today.

It makes me sad to say that my parents actually had a black community school in Sacramento. Later memos say and my late mother, Cheryl Fisher, was quoted in the newspaper in the early seventies in The Sacramento Observer saying that black children didn't have access to positive images of themselves. A lot of times were not held to a high standard academically.

And those were some of the reasons why people like her and my father, James Fisher, wanted to establish the school. And I often share that quote because if you took cut and paste, does that quote and if you put it in the newspaper.

Today and 2023, no one would think it was from the 1970s. And this is this is very similar throughout many of the interviews with institution builders throughout the country. So just down the street from here at Stanford in East Palo Alto. These were alternative K-12 schools and eventually Nairobi College, because of their concerns with their children, not being educated properly in public schools in East Palo Alto.

There were Stanford students who were volunteers, volunteer teachers in New Orleans, Louisiana. There was the Haiti on a work study center that not only had their school, their preschool, I think they went up to grade three, but they also published children's literature. They had a literary community for the parents. There were the African Free schools in Newark, New Jersey, that they were also very interested in creating access to public housing for black families.

So you have all of these really interesting models that I think can be tapped today. I think that we're not necessarily accessing some of the really important ways in which people were very strategic about how to solve multiple problems and focused on the child, like starting with the children in their classroom, in their schools, but also offering education opportunities and experiences for parents, offering parent education classes, offering opportunities for families to engage in cultural arts together.

So I talked about the multigenerational aspect of these black institutions are so important. And when I see schools now struggling or saying like, we don't have parent involvement, we don't know how to get the parents to the school. Well, what was really interesting to me is how many of these independent black institutions figured out what parents wanted, what they needed, and then they provided those things as opposed to saying, we're going to host you know, we're going to do Science Night on Wednesday at 7 p.m. or 6 p.m.

And maybe that's not what kids need. Maybe that's not what their families need. So I think it's really to think about the origins of what we're calling culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy. That is what many of these institutions were trying to establish early on. And they realized that the so-called educators, the teachers included everyone in the building.

So they didn't just see the classroom teacher as the only educator of children. Anyone who the child encountered throughout the day was considered an educator. Therefore, all of these people had to be socialized into a particular value system around seeing a child's excellence. So if you look at some data, like, for example, when I was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, there was a really important report called Race to Equity, and they looked at racial disparities between black and white families in the domains of housing, criminal and juvenile justice, workforce and education, and in the domain of juvenile and criminal justice.

One of the data points that they found was that African-American children were having these issues with the city bus drivers, and before they could even get to school, there were often incidents where bus drivers would call the police or get someone involved. And there was disciplinary action. Early in the morning before the child even got to the school.

So when you think about the black institutions model that every single person who comes into contact with the child is an educator and has and therefore needs to be brought into this community and needs to be a part of a dialog around what we can do to make sure our children have what they need. That would include the bus driver.

So I think that they were looking so far ahead, they were thinking about many generations out and this idea of what we call and future making, forecasting and, really trying to think about what would be the best next steps ten years out. There's always a process as you're building toward those ten year forecasts.

What is really interesting, is the encouragement of the people who work at the institutions to have their families be a part of the organized action.

So for example, when I interviewed Carmen Moyo, who was the math lead teacher at the Institute of Positive Education's school, she talked about how when she was a new mother, she would often have her child with her. She could feed her child. They also had fitness for the teacher, so they had food. They had healthy food for their teacher.

So she said when she got home from working at the Institute, she didn't have to figure out when she was going to work out. She didn't have to figure out what she was going to make for dinner. She had a healthy meal. She had taken care of herself. Her child had been taken care of, like all of these different things. And we think about how we create organizations, institutions, workplaces that speak to the needs of people, families, people with different needs, people with different abilities. I think that we're really missing out when we don't tap into some of these spaces that have already been created.

And I would argue that the publications from these spaces, their newspaper, their pamphlets, their literary journals, they offer what I refer to as maps of the future. So we can learn a lot about what they offered and what they did. If we retrace their steps and go back to the periodicals and the publications and the pamphlets that they were producing.

And so that's one of my passions and my goals at this stage of my career is to really follow these maps. I want to follow these constellations of institutions and institution builders to try to understand how is it that they responded to these really difficult, tense times, tense times that we feel now and sometimes people feel hopeless. But I'm like they had very similar social and political things happening that felt like, you know, felt hopeless.

Yet in the midst of all that, they figured out, how are we going to counter this? How are we going to create these other spaces where people can thrive?

Books and Ideas: Is there anybody, any of your colleagues that are working on this stuff in a more multinational comparative context? Is that just idiosyncratic to the United States history and experience, or are there analogous occurrences and trajectories ?

Maisha Winn: The time period that I'm focused on, so the black power in the black arts movement in the United States were both influenced and influencers, so they were influencers of the Caribbean arts movement that took place in the UK. They're the they were part of a Pan-African movement which was in countries in the Caribbean as well as throughout the continent of Africa.

And many of the black institution builders were very much inspired by African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah who was Ghana's first leader after their independence, or Julius Nyerere who was really a hero to many of these institution builders, and he was Tanzania as first president after independence. He started a policy called Ujamaa, which is one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa, which is really called family hood. And it taps into the African socialism, like pre-colonial socialism.

Like you'll hear a lot of Pan-Africanist talk about the fact that, before there was Marx and all of these folks, there was already a type of socialism that was at work in different countries throughout the continent of Africa, and a way of bringing resources together. So I would say that the movement here in the United States was greatly influenced by some of the fights for independence in African and Caribbean countries.

But also, I think there was this exchange of energy and inspiration as many of those leaders were also coming and learning from and with people here. So as far as the thinking around history and futures, is it a specialized thing there? The work that I've done with the Institute for the Future is what I love about it is there are people all

over the world who consider themselves to be futurists and who are engaged in future thinking work.

Brazil, Taiwan, South Korea. I mean, I had people from all over the world when I did foresight, training and work with the Institute for the Future. That's one of the things that's very exciting as you get this different perspective. So there are People who are thinking about what it might mean to constantly think about We're in 2023 now, but I'm always trying to think about, well, what about in 2033? It's not that I'm not here present, but what would need to happen for this, what we call a preferred future, what would have to take place for us to get there?

What has already happened that could inform what needs to happen to get there? What are some of the things that happened that didn't work? Not everything from this movement. I also don't want to paint like this was utopia, but I do think there's a lot of research that focuses on different aspects of the movement that may have been problematic, like maybe being like having like a key central charismatic figure as opposed to thinking about the everyday workers.

And that's one of the reasons why the Institute of Positive Education interests me so much, because they are really anti having a key person. They really distributed their leadership, they really distributed the work. Everyone will say Hakim Madhubuti inspired him. He mostly got most of them to come to do the work.

And what was really interesting is in April, when I caught up visionaries together for a lunch, that was something that came up. They talked about the fact that Haki Madhubuti, as incredible and charismatic and inspiring as he was, did not allow any cult of personality stuff to develop around him. He didn't want that. He wanted people to see themselves as leaders and for while he was flying out of Chicago to teach at Cornell and he was commuting to D.C. to teach at Howard, so he wasn't always there.

And so I think that that's something that makes their organization stand out. And I also think it may have something to do with their staying power. You know, this idea of being able to think about, to cultivate leadership in many different folks. Yeah. And just being more savvy around having lots of different point people for different things and bringing out people's talents, cultivating and bringing out people's talents and saying, Oh, you're the you're the communications person; but maybe someone else has something to contribute to that conversation. So that's very

it's very inspiring the way that they work together and even hearing them talk about it today, it's still there.

Published in *booksandideas*, on March 1st, 2024.