In his dynamic and influential 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, David Walker advised free people of color to “seek after the substance of learning,” and in particular, to attain literacy and the facility with language that will enable them to comprehend “the width and depth of English Grammar” and “write a neat piece of composition in prose or in verse.” Such abilities, Walker argued, constituted weapons against oppression: “[F]or coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble. . . . Why, what is the matter? Why, they know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.” Walker’s advice and his clear connection of literacy, resistance, and self-determination reflects the understanding of 19th-century African Americans that, as Elizabeth McHenry explains, “text, identity, and public access” were “linked”; their belief that “reading and writing” were integral to “forming durable communities and asserting their right to American citizenship”; and their resolve to use literacy to gain recognition “in the national public sphere.” Indeed, as autobiographers such as Frederick Douglass articulated and scholars have explored, literacy was not only a tool that could help African Americans to gain freedom, enabling a literate slave to use reading or writing to escape or a black activist to create and publish arguments against slavery, but was itself a form of personal liberty.

Jacqueline Bacon is an independent researcher who lives in San Diego, CA.
Given the importance of literacy and facility with print culture for African Americans in the 19th century, scholars have begun to explore a crucial question: How did African Americans—enslaved workers, free people, and fugitives and refugees; struggling workers and those with means; everyday black citizens as well as famous leaders—gain these skills? Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan’s *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* and Shirley Wilson Logan’s *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America* offer us answers through thorough archival scholarship and careful analysis. Although both scholars are well grounded in their disciplines—Belt-Beyan draws on sociological and anthropological studies of symbolic ritual behavior; Logan’s analysis is based in historical and theoretical rhetorical scholarship—they focus on primary sources that allow us to investigate and understand how 19th-century African Americans learned to read, write, and persuade. These diaries, letters, periodicals, and records of families and community organizations give readers an engagement with the learners themselves and their motivations, difficulties, and transformations. Both studies also challenge standard definitions and commonly held assumptions about African American literacy and rhetoric, particularly those that involve class distinctions, separate orality from literacy (and favor one or the other), or assume that those who did not read and/or write were not part of, or influenced by, literate communities. They also challenge those who maintain that literacy is somehow “given” or enabled by the oppressor, or propose that attaining literacy is a private endeavor that alienates individuals from their larger communities.

In *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions*, Belt-Beyan explores literacy practices that emerged in the 19th century in families and communities, focusing particularly on those efforts that “initiated within [African Americans’] own spheres of influence” (3). Although the acquisition of literacy skills is a necessary component of these practices, she goes beyond this to explore how behaviors developed within family and community groups to promote and maintain rituals and traditions that encouraged and fostered literacy. She also demonstrates that these traditions were considered so important that individuals would endure great hardship, even risk their lives, to perpetuate them. Various chapters consider the literacy practices of families, who developed traditions and passed them on through generations; and the informal and formal schools that were created and managed by African Americans such as Frederick Douglass’s plantation Sabbath school, the camp meetings, and private black schools in the North and South. Belt-Beyan documents the influence of various community-
based endeavors, including literary societies and other organizations created for members' benefit and community improvement; newspapers; and gatherings such as the national black conventions beginning in Philadelphia in 1830.

Logan's *Liberating Language* answers the provocative question that, as she indicates, has been asked or implied for centuries by white observers of African American speakers and writers: "Where did they learn to speak?" Logan makes it clear that her study rejects the patronizing assumptions many whites display through this query; her purpose is not to engage the discourse of "authentication" and white "curiosity" that constitutes "an interrogation of the 'articulate' black person." Rather, she aims to truly discover where and how African Americans gained rhetorical education, not necessarily through explicit instruction in theories or practices, but through engagement with "the application of theoretical principles" that constituted "rhetorical skills" (3). The chapters consider various sites in which such abilities developed: efforts that fostered what Logan, following novelist Ralph Ellison, calls "free-floating literacy," through which reading, writing, and rhetorical skills were promoted from either within or outside the community such as in slave "safe harbors," religious settings, battlefield camps, or workplaces; the private self-educational pursuits of learners; the rhetorical education facilitated by literary societies; and the direct and indirect instruction in rhetorical principles found in the columns of the black press.

Belt-Beyan and Logan offer somewhat different definitions of literacy, but both challenge narrow meanings that might restrict our search for education in reading, writing, and persuasion. For Belt-Beyan, literacy traditions are manifested in "ways of knowing, behaving, and believing" that engage "language, written and oral" (16). Thus she includes, in addition to reading and writing texts, practices such as reading maps and recitation of memorized texts. On the other hand, Logan explains that although "literacy has been linked historically to writing," she favors an expanded definition that includes those who demonstrate the "combined abilities" to use language in ways commonly implicated in reading and writing practices (3–4). This definition allows for the inclusion of those such as Sojourner Truth, who, although she did not read or write, "interacted with and manipulated literate culture in the absence of conventional literary skills" (138). These expanded definitions of literacy are key to understanding the range of practices related to black print culture in the 19th century and to understanding their significance in African American communities. Those who could not read or write were frequently read to and may have memorized or dictated texts to others; texts were experienced in various ways, both individually and communally. Moreover, these practices break down the easy and problematic distinctions often made between "oral"
and “literate” African American traditions. Oral forms may reflect a cultural value
given to facility with written language, as Belt-Beyan reveals in her discussion of
the Spirituals that celebrate reading. At religious meetings, for example, even
when a preacher was illiterate, the written text was considered “sacred” and an
integral “part of the ritual” (170). Written forms may engage or reflect oral prac-
tices, Logan demonstrates, as in the speeches and sermons that were published in
black newspapers and in the written critiques of speakers offered by diarists such
as Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

The range of texts and educational sites that Logan and Belt-Beyan consider
challenges the notion that literacy practices and rhetorical training were confined
to the middle and upper classes. Both studies focus on clandestine as well as “vis-
ible” educational institutions for enslaved African Americans, the formal and
informal schooling that took place in churches, and the literacy rituals and learning engaged in by African American soldiers in battlefield camps during the Civil
War. Even venues that might bring to mind more elite groups, they demonstrate,
actually involved a wider range of working people than might be assumed. Both
studies establish that lectures, readings, and debates sponsored by literary societies
often drew large audiences of workers as well as property owners; those with edu-
cation as well as those without formal training, but with an interest in learning.
Even diarists, Logan shows, whose literacy set them apart from those without such
skills, were not necessarily wealthy or privileged with great amounts of leisure
time. Indeed, Logan notes their connection to “the wider cohort of African
Americans who engaged in some form of self-education through their use of . . . private literacy” (32).

Literacy traditions and rhetorical education are not offered to passive learners;
as Belt-Beyan aptly notes, “[l]iteracy knowledge is . . . never given, but taken,
both consciously and subconsciously” (4). Both studies highlight that African
Americans’ educational opportunities in reading, writing, and rhetoric were not
offered to them, but created by them, often by resisting restrictions that aimed to
prevent such learning. Logan describes the clandestine gatherings and venues out
of the range of whites’ purview, “hush harbors” or “Invisible Institutions” in which
African Americans formed ideas and discourse, engaging in both “a ‘loosening’ of
expression” and the creation of new “act[s] of expression” (12).

As African Americans learned to read, write, and persuade and practiced these
skills in various settings, they dynamically interacted with and altered their envi-
ronments and even the language and texts that they engaged. As Belt-Beyan
asserts, “[a]ny literacy event requires the construction of oral or written text mean-
ing through the use of prior explicit or tacit knowledge gained from social and cul-
tural experiences” (4). Belt-Beyan provides a fascinating example in the case of Lucy Skipwith, a head house servant entrusted with the management and recording of her master’s affairs on his Alabama plantation in his absence. In addition to hiring teachers for her fellow slaves, Skipwith herself taught them reading and writing, and, significantly, “rewrote instructional reading materials” for the plantation’s children (53). As Skipwith altered the plantation’s literary culture through her writing, she also affected material conditions. Through her letters to her master, she convinced him, for example, to dismiss an immoral overseer and not to sell her daughter.

While in the case of Skipwith we are able to see the product of her interpretation of texts, the process by which readers interact with discourse is often unavailable to historians. For that reason, two of Logan’s discoveries are particularly significant. First, Logan establishes that certain diarists wrote explicitly about their responses to and evaluations of oral and written texts. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, she demonstrates, critiqued sermons that she heard as well as her own writing. Charles W. Chesnutt noted in his journals the rhetorical texts that he was reading and included an essay he wrote to put the principles into practice. Wells-Barnett and Chesnutt, of course, are well-known figures in the history of African American print culture, and Logan’s discussions of these aspects of their writing allow us to understand their engagement with language and texts in new ways. But Logan goes beyond these familiar figures to include less well-known diarists such as Frances Anne Rollin and Mary Virginia Montgomery who similarly recorded their interactions with oral and print culture. Logan also demonstrates that the black press not only stressed for readers “the benefits of reading widely,” but also “of developing the frequently neglected rhetorical skill of critical reading” (111–13). These key findings, the product of careful archival research, add greatly to our discourse about African Americans and print culture, giving us insight not just into what they read, but how they read it.

The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions and Liberating Language make it clear that for 19th-century African Americans, literacy and facility with written and spoken language were key forms of resistance to slavery and oppression. Moreover, these studies demonstrate that African Americans were keenly aware of the power of literacy and rhetoric and, as Belt-Beyan emphasizes, “associated freedom with reading and writing” and understood the role of these abilities in fully determining and controlling their lives (156). Belt-Beyan examines in detail the ways that the African American church and various prominent clergy such as Henry Highland Garnet, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen promoted a “theology of liberation” that “included views on intellectual as well as per-
sonal freedom” (136). Through her analysis here, and her thorough research into primary sources that support it, Belt-Beyan effectively augments studies that focus primarily on black churches’ oral practices or ongoing educational efforts. The importance of literacy was emphasized not only through teaching and encouraging people to read and write, but also from the pulpit as a theological tenet.

Logan’s fascinating discoveries of newspapers published in battlefield camps for black soldiers reveals that they explicitly considered persuading through writing a part of their personal arsenal. The *Black Warrior*, a newspaper published in 1864 in Camp Parapet, Louisiana, by the all-black 14th Regiment Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, noted that its goal was “to raise the status of colored troops by proving their capability of appreciating, preserving, and defending the principles of Liberty either by pen or sword” (22). These words enhance our view of black Civil War troops, revealing that these soldiers struggled to gain the ability to read, write, and persuade as they fought for freedom; that gaining literacy was linked for them to the struggle for advancement; and that they saw facility with language as another powerful weapon at their disposal.

These examples underscore a central thesis of both studies: literacy education for African Americans was not an isolated or individualistic endeavor, but a communal one. Even diarists, Logan indicates, saw their self-education as a means of doing work for the wider community; their “recorded rhetorical engagements are frequently communal and inflected by a racial sensibility” (56). Belt-Beyan’s discussion of family literacy traditions underscores the strength of African American families, a point that, given the weight of negative and inaccurate scholarly and popular discourses on black families, must continue to be made; and she emphasizes that these families viewed literacy as an inheritance that is passed on to strengthen future generations and give them opportunities in a hostile environment. In the 19th century, black parents, Belt-Beyan indicates, promoted literacy in order to “sav[e] their children from living lives of lost opportunity” and “to gain some measure of control over their children’s fate” (80).

Yet the fact that African Americans sought literacy within communal endeavors and with a comprehension of the important implications for freedom and opportunity does not mean that they were not also motivated by a factor that scholarly treatments often overlook—enjoyment. Both Logan and Belt-Beyan bring this element into the picture, making their accounts of readers, writers, and persuaders especially engaging, comprehensive, and well-rounded. Belt-Beyan notes in her discussion of the purchase of reading materials by slaves that the fact that they spent their scarce time and money gained from additional work on books offers “a compelling account of just how much they must have enjoyed and val-
ued reading” (99). Logan includes memorable quotes from various diarists that show that they were motivated by “pleasure” and “passion” for reading and writing as well as by activist, race-conscious goals (47). These images round out these compelling two studies, demonstrating that African Americans attained literacy and engaged print culture because to do so constituted a form of freedom; because reading and writing were important for cultural, racial, and familial goals; because they could use literacy in the struggle for liberty and civil rights; and because they found these pursuits enjoyable and fulfilling.

NOTES


2 Ibid., 31–32.

3 Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (Durham, NC, 2002), 24.

4 Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan, The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century (Westport, CT, 2004), 3. Page numbers for quoted material are placed in parentheses in the text.

5 Shirley Wilson Logan, Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America (Carbondale, IL, 2008), 1–3. Page numbers for quoted material are placed in parentheses in the text.