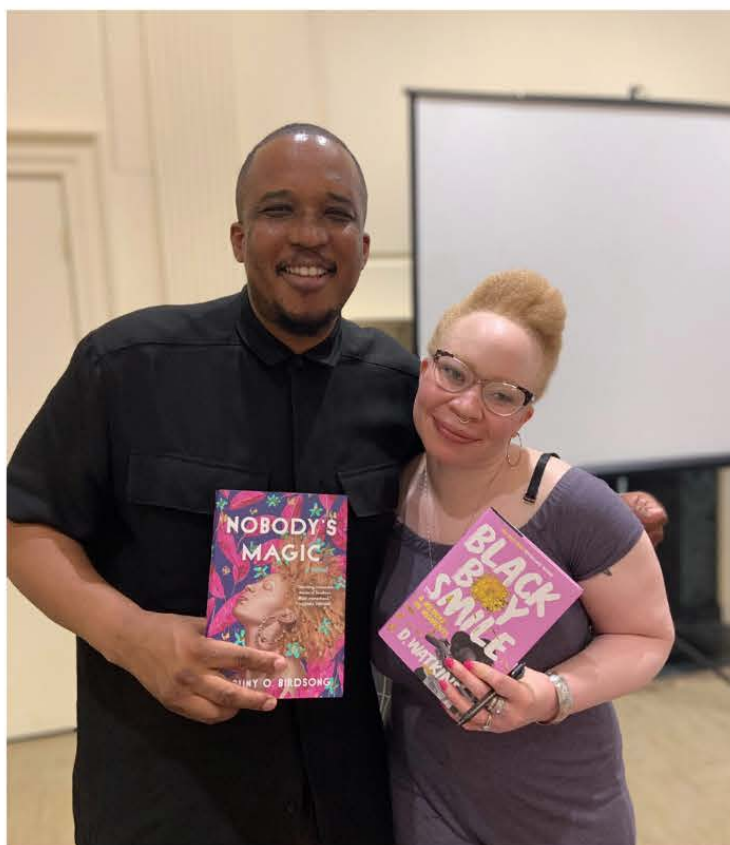


THE CRITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BUILDING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT FOR BLACK WRITERS

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INTRODUCTION

The Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation (Hurston/Wright) is a community-based 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that offers intensive and culturally competent writing programs that help Black writers build writing skills, navigate the publishing industry and devote quality time to producing work as professional writers. In addition, free public readings and events since Hurston/Wright's inception has afforded thousands of readers in the opportunity to engage with hundreds of talented Black authors. Hurston/Wright was founded in Washington, D.C. on August 22, 1990, by multi-genre writer Marita Golden and educator/businessman Clyde McElvane. They determined that Hurston/Wright Foundation's mission would be to discover, mentor, and honor Black writers by implementing services, supports and opportunities that provide community and professional development for Black writers. The symbolic naming of Hurston/Wright centers not only on literary figures but also the literary and cultural movements that, over time, supported and drove the work of Black artists and writers, often providing spaces of safety, development, and propelled the work of art as activism during times of societal oppression and marginalization. For example, Marita Golden and Clyde McElvane, in their time recognized the constraints for Black writers in the world of publishing and training and established safe spaces for Black writers to share, grow, and learn from each other, creating new pipelines of opportunity unseen, and broadening the literary canon (Williams-Pulfer & Ali-Coleman, 2022).

Initial seed money for the organization came from Golden's own funds. George Mason University in Virginia, where she served as teaching faculty at the time, helped her establish Hurston/Wright as a nonprofit organization. Early financial supporters of the organization included notable writers and scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Terry McMillan, Gloria Naylor, John Edgar Wideman, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and John Grisham.

Programs and Awards

The mission-driven focus on discovering and honoring Black writers led to the creation of Hurston/Wright's first program, the **Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers**, and the popular Hurston/Wright Legacy Book Award. The only award of its kind, the College Award has, since its start in 1991, honored almost 100 Black writers in college/university undergraduate and graduate programs. Almost half of those awarded have gone on to publish books since receiving the monetary award that also includes free tuition to a Hurston/Wright summer writing workshop. Past recipients of the Hurston/Wright College award include Tayari Jones, author of numerous books, including *An American Marriage*; Natalie Baszile, author of the acclaimed book, *Queen Sugar*, that was later adapted to television; and NAACP award-winning multi-genre author, DaMaris Hill.

The Hurston/Wright Legacy Book Award was established in 2001. The first national award presented to Black writers by a national organization of Black writers, the Legacy Award honors book authors in the genres of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. The Legacy Book Award was envisioned by the late award-winning novelist E. Lynn Harris, a close friend of Marita Golden. The Legacy Book Award has showcased

more than 400 authors of poetry, fiction and nonfiction books as winners and finalists during an annual gala. This event also recognizes individual writers and literary champions with lifetime achievement awards that highlight their merit in the field. Past merit awardees have included Rita Dove, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Gordon Parks, and Amiri Baraka.

Hurston/Wright's in-person **Writers Week Workshop Retreats** have been in operation for more than 20 years in partnership with university partners who provide free or low-cost classroom space to facilitate the workshops. Howard University has been a consistent partner for more than 10 years. These competitive workshops offer selected participants:

- 10+ hours of writing seminars and discussions
- 45 minutes of one-on-one time with an award-winning instructor
- Constructive, guided feedback on writing from peers and workshop leader
- Presentations from publishing industry insiders and veteran authors

Since 2020, due to the COVID-19 global health pandemic, our offerings moved online due to mandated quarantine. Although we have resumed in-person programs since 2022, we have recognized the value of continuing robust virtual programming. The Hurston/Wright Foundation's virtual Writing and Professional Development program offers services, supports and opportunities to Black writers who are at various levels of their writing journey towards publication and may not be able to attend in-person, week-long workshops and events.

The Hurston/Wright Writer-in-Residence (WIR) Program was conceived in 2021 and launched in 2022. It aims to provide published Black writers with dedicated space and funding to focus on their writing craft and individual writing projects. This program strives to enable them to make meaningful impact on emerging Black writers and the community-at-large through workshops and community events. In partnership with vetted colleges/universities and publishing companies, the Hurston/Wright WIR program provides free housing, a stipend of \$15,000 and extended time to focus on writing projects. Selected participants enjoy opportunities to connect with other writers, share their craft with emerging writers as workshop instructors, present their published work with the surrounding community and find support through valuable mentorship opportunities. The Hurston/Wright WIR Program builds a viable pipeline of Black writers through intentional peer-supported engagement, culturally competent mentorship, and financial support. The inaugural Hurston/Wright WIRs are Destiny O. Birdsong and Shayla Lawz.

Current Leadership

From 1990-2021, Hurston/Wright was led by a managing board with both Marita Golden and Clyde McElvane serving separately as part-time executive director from 1990-2014. Golden and McElvane have since transitioned from their roles as founding directors of Hurston/Wright and McElvane is no longer affiliated with the nonprofit. Golden remains as President Emerita, but is no longer part of the board, nor engaged in the day-to-day operation of Hurston/Wright. She frequently helps to raise money or provide free or low-cost writing workshops and craft talks for the organization each year. Hurston/Wright was awarded an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship in 2021 that allowed the organization to work with a trained PhD-level researcher, Kim Williams-Pulfer, assigned as a full-time research and evaluation manager. This placement happened three months before the board hired the organization's first full-time executive director, Khadijah Ali-Coleman. Ali-Coleman began serving in 2021 as the board began transitioning from a managing board to a governance board. Ali-Coleman's background in arts

administration and research has been instrumental in guiding priorities centered around conducting research and assessment efforts to accurately assess past and present impact. These efforts have enabled the organization to measure impact while continuing to effectively respond to stakeholder needs through programs providing services, support, and opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Recent Research Project Overview

From 2020 to 2021, Hurston/Wright employed a mixed-methods research methodology to better understand Hurston/Wright's position among other literary organizations within the United States, while also contextualizing the impact the organization has had on its community stakeholders within recent years. Through surveys and focus groups, Hurston/Wright's research team engaged with former workshop participants to investigate the research question: *What are the key needs of Black writers, and how has Hurston/Wright provided service, support, and opportunity to meet those needs?* A major component of the research engagement involved an exploration of Hurston/Wright's valuable histories and the corresponding issues that led to the organization's founding. This uncovering during the research team's literature review has given context to the organization's evolution and relevancy within the literary arts landscape.

Historical & Field Review/Pre-Work

Hurston/Wright's founding in 1990 came at a time of a perceived multicultural boom in literary publishing. What Marita Golden and Clyde McElvane saw in the experiences of Black writers resonate within Richard So's (2020) recent work, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*.

Cultural Redlining

So's (2020) research identifies a dominant myth about the perception of increased titles by Black authors via major literary publishers. So (2020) notes that:

White authors represent 97 percent of authors published at Random House...White authors also represent 90 percent of the most reviewed novelists, magazines, and periodicals. And when it comes to book prizes, white authors comprise 91 percent of novelists who win major awards. 98 percent of novelists who appear on the bestseller list are white. Through every phase of the literary field, from production to reception to distinction, white publishers exercise a distinct command over minority authors, particularly Black novelists.

During this period, So (2020) suggests that this form of publishing served as a form of “cultural redlining” where major publishers only had the interest and capacity to publish a small and limited amount of Black and other minority writers. So (2020) also notes that while scholars of Black literature would celebrate the 1980s and 1990s as a period of boom for multicultural and Black publications in particular, the data tells another story. The publication of a few Black authors gave an inaccurate perception of the industry's true growth and diversity. (So, 2020). For example, Toni Morrison's work as an editor at Random House led to increased publications of Black writers that launched the careers of Chinua Achebe and Toni Cade Bambara, amongst others. However, through new computational data methods, So (2020) shows that mainstream literary publishing between 1950-2000 did not include many books written by Black writers

except for the writers positively impacted by editors like Toni Morrison during her tenure at Random House who pushed to publish Black writers.

McElvane and Golden understood this reality in hearing from the experiences of Black writers that seemed unable to crack into mainstream publishing. Additionally, Golden was stunned by how Black writers were not representative in student cohorts of newly developed MFA programs around the country despite the increased attention paid to Black writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Ishmael Reed by the late 80's and early 90's. In her own university classes, she witnessed the absence. Hurston/Wright was formed to address these gaps and create one national organization that could support and nurture the talent of Black writers while also helping to amplify their work to new audiences (Williams-Pulfer & Ali-Coleman, 2022).

Disrupting Inequity

Today, the publishing industry continues to marginalize BIPOC authors. So and Wezerek (2020) found a persisting statistic that during 1950-2018, major publishers were 97% white in terms of authors; reviews were 90% white; prizewinners were 91% white; and bestsellers were 98% white - and these numbers are unchanging in this period. Furthermore, Lee & Low Books in their study first commissioned in 2015 and then updated in 2019 found that the publishing workforce has not increased diversity among its ranks and remains white (76%), straight (81%), and non-disabled (89%). Tracy Sherod, then editorial director of Amistad, a Harper Collins imprint noted that "There's a correlation between the number of people of color who work in publishing and the number of books that are published by authors of color" (So and Wezerek, 2020).

Despite these structural challenges, Hurston/Wright has remained committed to supporting its writers despite low funding opportunities, unsteady infrastructure over the years and moments where the organization itself struggled financially.

Mixed-Methods Methodology

The research team engaged in a mixed-methods methodology that included:

Archival Work, Interviews, and Quantitative Data: Exploring and analyzing archives and previous years of evaluation, in addition to additional interviews identified the rationale for Hurston/Wright's founding, the development of its core mission and vision, and the organization's continued value in supporting the needs and interest of Black writers. A multi-level and mixed methods study was further developed that identified how Hurston/Wright has continued to develop based on its founding principles supporting the needs of Black writers.

Field Study: The Hurston/Wright research team facilitated a field study that situated the mission, goals, and practices of the Hurston/Wright Foundation within the larger field of literary organizations. Utilizing a recent funding award for literary organizations as a database, we identified the organizations operating in the field of literary services for writers.

Specifically, the research identified BIPOC funded organizations and analyzed these organizations to assess their practices related to operations, programming, fundraising, and mechanisms for documenting and assessing success. This project offered greater insight into the work of the broader field and situated

Hurston/Wright's work and efforts in the broader landscape. We were able to identify the best evaluation, funding, and staffing practices while also deepening understanding about how the literary field understands its work and seeks to support diverse writers. The most significant finding of this field study revealed that Hurston/Wright emerged as one of the oldest organizations in the country serving Black writers with a multi-genre focus. This field review also captured programmatic trends among BIPOC led literary arts organizations. The trends identified the importance of centering the specific needs of writers and their core audiences through various forms of outreach such as awards, training opportunities, and close mentorship that advanced underrepresented visibility in a white literary field.

Two additional research engagements rounded out the broader study focused on assessing the needs and interests of Black writers and Hurston/Wright's significance in supporting those writers. These engagements included a series of focus groups and a Participant Interest Survey.

Focus Groups: There were two sessions of focus groups that included 4-5 participants each. Participants brought experiences from across the field of Black literary arts, including nonprofits, philanthropy, and higher education. These participants were selected for the focus groups because of their rich and interconnected experience in art networks, particularly with Black artists and writers, along with their extensive support of Hurston/Wright.

Overarching questions that guided the focus groups sessions included:

- a. How has Hurston/Wright supported the field of Black literature?
- b. What are some of the valuable steps that Hurston/Wright can take in the future to continue supporting the literary field?)

Participant Interest Survey: The research team developed a survey that sought to understand participant assessments of Hurston/Wright's mission through collected data illustrating the specific needs of writers as they engage with Hurston/Wright.

Data/Findings:

Several themes and ideas emerged from the focus groups related to the question categories:

1. *Fully Assessing the Vision and Mission of Hurston/Wright:*
 - Participants highlighted the continued need to create space for Black writers and readers through programming, events, and community building.
 - They also noted the importance of supporting the love of writing and reading along with honoring and mentoring writers at every stage.
2. *Documenting Success and Planning for the Future:*
 - Another important theme that emerged from the focus groups urged Hurston/Wright to continually work on strategic partnerships as a critical pathway to amplify the mission and to garner financial and other forms of support.
 - The importance of both research and advocacy was also highlighted and participants noted their value in documenting the impact of Black writers on communities served and as a way to encourage the publishing and funding world to continue to provide support to amplify Black writing.

- The focus groups also highlighted the importance of cultivating donors at every stage, for example, Black Boomers who want to give and current philanthropic interests in funding social justice and Black organizations.
3. *Refining Hurston/Wright's Programmatic Focus for the Future:*
- Participants noted the value in creating opportunities to build community beyond current programming, especially in increased strategic engagement with post-workshop “captive audiences.”
 - They also noted the value in supporting the “marginalized within the marginalized”- enhancing community by leading discussions around critical controversies and challenges that have an impact on the Black writing community with the goal of bridging critical divides and cultivating authentic shared dialogue.
 - Participants urged Hurston/Wright to continue to find ways to innovate signature and long-standing programs like the Legacy Awards to support greater community involvement.
 - They also added that Hurston/Wright should enhance the connection between Black writers and readers to the work of community memory and social justice.
 - Participants also noted that Hurston/Wright should identify and be strategic about opportunities for programming, advocacy, and serving as a source of knowledge “clearinghouse” on all things Black Literature in a strategic way and to match current organizational capabilities.

For the participant interest survey, fifty-five (59) surveys were collected, and the key findings include:

- 83% of survey respondents had attended a Hurston/Wright writing workshop.
- When asked: “Hurston/Wright’s stated mission today is to support black writers. In your opinion, what should be the primary outcome for which Hurston/Wright strives for every writer?” The top three responses were:
 - o Membership in community of Black writers- 39 (70.9%)
 - o Recognition by/connection to Black readers- 35 (63.6%)
 - o Published, whether indie or mainstream- 34 (61.8%)

The survey also asked participants to explain their choice for the above question. The following key themes emerged based on respondent statements:

Theme #1: Cultivate and Center a Safe and Affirming Space for Black writers which includes:

- Create an ongoing/long-term sense of community to support life-long learning and craft development
- Support writers at every stage
- Provide intensive mentoring
- Focus on the idea of Black literature and Black writing as a form of social justice- a tool for representing and supporting the wider community in conversations on equity and inclusion

Representative Participant Quotes:

Participant#1: “The most realistic outcome of any foundation aimed at a particular writing population is to form a solid community that supports those writers. Everything else is icing on the cake.”

Participant #2: “Published if they want, given viable advice and resources if they want to write full-time, H/W's support and bolstering for their future writing career if they embark on one, and fellowship with other Black writers is a given.”

Theme #2: Promote Industry Recognition/Expand Readership and Support:

- Support writers in their pursuit of mainstream success
- Promote /provide writers with opportunities or avenues for attaining financial support for their work
- Identify alternative avenues for recognition and publishing

Representative Participant Quote:

Participant #3: “Barriers to publication and access to publishers seeking writing by Black authors that is diverse in topics/genre/subject and story is my main concern and worry -- advocating for the notion that Black writing is many things and that all those things have value and deserve publication and readership is a powerful way to advance the foundation's current goals and also expand its reach.”

Conclusion/Discussion

The research team completed an assessment of previous years of evaluation from its 2017-2021 writing workshops data before embarking on the most recent research project. This data assessment revealed that between 2017-2021 over ninety-five percent (95%) of participants found the writing workshops engaging and indicated that they would attend a Hurston/Wright event in the future. Participants also recognized the quality of the instructors. Specifically, participants appreciated the fact their workshop leader improved their writing craft and technique. Participants strongly valued the space created by Hurston/Wright specifically for Black writers to grow and learn in an affirming community. With renewed calls for social justice after the murder of George Floyd and many others and the onset of COVID, participants recognized Hurston/Wright's commitment to providing meaningful in-person and virtual experience for writers. Virtual community not only kept with the rich tradition of the Hurston/Wright workshop but also offered an additional opportunity to support and cultivate a sense of community during an uncertain and anxious time. Finally, participants also valued the role that Hurston/Wright plays in advancing Black storytelling as a source of empowerment and promoting a socially just world. Our methodology captured data that gave an even broader understanding of what support and community looked like for Black writers.

Upon completing the first research project, an academic paper was written and we presented parts of this research in the presentation titled, *What Is Our Inheritance: Tracing the Evolution of Black Writers through the Work of The Hurston/Wright Foundation*, during the 2022 Center for Black Literature's 16th Annual Conference and have made it publicly available [here](#). Based on our previous research, we synthesize several key takeaways, namely that the needs of Black writers continued to evolve since Hurston/Wright's founding. In addition, while the concerns remain around issues of marginalization in the publishing industry, the needs of Black writers related to community building, intensive craft development and mentorship, as well as career building remain. Finally, there are current trends that speak to the need for increased amplification of Black writers and highlight the indelible work that these writers provide in giving

voice to the issues faced in Black communities, promoting community and cultural and social memory, and advancing the goals of social justice which aims to eradicate oppression in all its forms.

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