

A Tribute to the Carolina African American Writers' Collective.



Carolina African American Writers' Collective

I don't remember ever being a member of an African American writers' critique group. In high school, back in New York in 1981, I was president of a cultural club exclusively for black students. I was familiar with John H. Harmon's organization in White Plains (the Afro-American Cultural Foundation), attending some of the events he sponsored. I was even (if ever so briefly) a member of the NAACP, participating in its youth program called ACT-SO (Afro-Academic Cultural Technological Scientific Olympics) in 1979 and 1980. Besides cultural clubs, there were Afro-American arts events to attend as well. I remember going to a scholarship aid fund event at a local black church in White Plains where the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the finest of the Negro spirituals like "Ain't Got Time to Die" and "Wade in the Water." But what if there had been a black writers' club at my high school or elsewhere in Westchester County? What if?

By the time I got to Durham for my very first Carolina African American Writers' Collective (CAAWC) meeting in November 2006, I was hungry. I had never been to Durham before, only heard it mentioned as one of the three cities that made up the Research Triangle region of northern North Carolina. I felt odd being in Durham, what with no relatives there to contact. Unfamiliar with the street I was on (Fayetteville), I was glad when I spotted Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). Entering KFC with only fifteen minutes to go before the meeting would begin, I wolfed down my two-piece meal.

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I got to the Stanford Warren Branch Library right on time for the meeting. I remember asking a librarian where I could find the meeting room for CAAWC. She told me the room was on the lower level of the library. I don't remember if I took the elevator or the stairs, only that when I opened the door, I found a group of African-American women sitting at a long table. One of these women had a brilliant smile on her face. I would soon learn her name was Lila Teresa Church. I walked cautiously toward the table. Who were these women?

When I sat down, they all greeted me. It was Teresa who asked me my name and where I was from. I noticed that she wrote down every bit of detail I offered about myself. One participant, Musette, read from an email her daughter-in-law had written on the lessons she had learned about acclimating to New York City culture. I loved this piece because it reminded me so much of New York. Names started trickling into my brain—Valjeanne, Ebony, Raina, and DeLana. Each one of them read a poem, and each poet's words spoke to me. They each had something to say in an evocative way. How could my words possibly match their own? I noticed they all had copies of their poems, but I had only brought one copy of my own poem so I read that one aloud. Teresa exclaimed, "What you are saying should be heard at town halls all over this state."

Ebony was applying for graduate school, setting her sights on attending New York University. A discussion ensued about the pitfalls of writing application letters. "Send me what you've written so far and I'll be glad to look it over," Raina volunteered. Ebony beamed. I was impressed by the camaraderie among the members. This meeting was an all-women's session because, due to a scheduling conflict, Lenard D. Moore, the group's founder, was unable to attend. Even so, the women present critiqued each other's work with an attention to craft that proved they were engaged despite the absence of their mentor. Hmm, if I had had any reservations about this group prior to participating in the meeting, these ladies had succeeded in putting my doubts to rest.

There was also some talk about how racism was impacting the black youth in the region. I was shocked because I thought any place north of Charlotte had to be progressive and light years ahead of Charlotte. But I realized, listening to the various women's concerns, that the Raleigh/Durham area was really no different from Charlotte in terms of race relations.

With a new year (January 2007), I met Lenard. Actually, I had indirectly met him via a December 2006 email he'd sent me in response to my own email in which I spoke of my participation in the November meeting and alerted him that I would not be able to attend the CAAWC's December meeting due to a scheduling conflict. I could tell from his words that he was a warm-hearted individual: "I'm sure everyone enjoyed meeting you and listening to your work as well as reading your work . . . Of course, I understand about you not being able to attend this month's meeting. Have a wonderful day and take care."

In person, Lenard turned out to be this hysterically funny guy who knew how to have fun while workshopping other people's poems. I'll never forget the time (after I had

