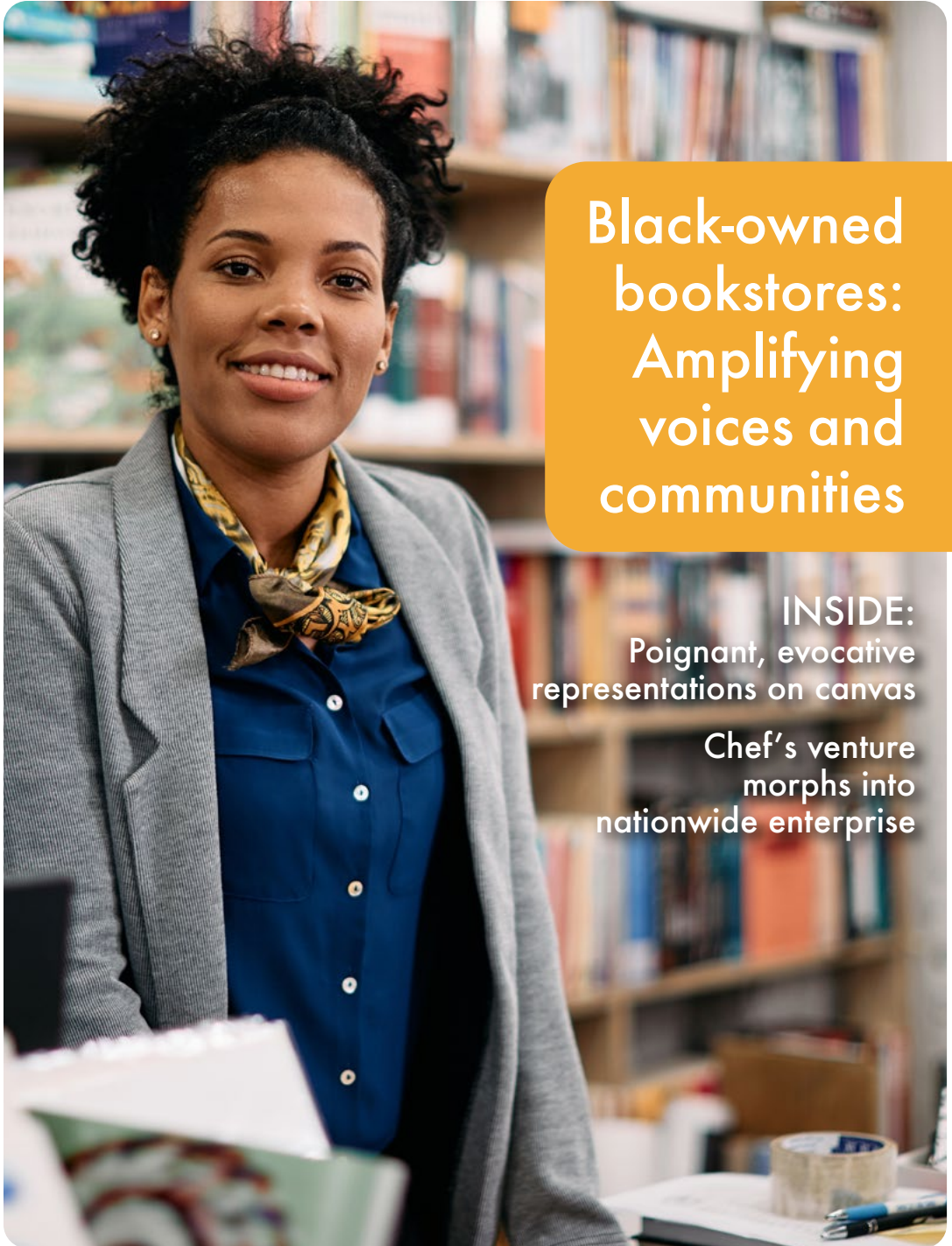


unity



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture

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Black-owned bookstores: Amplifying voices and communities

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Mattie Jone Primm, owner of a bookstore in Mississippi, says her business has hundreds of titles related to “Black culture.”
Photo courtesy of Maati Jone Primm

Black-owned bookstores amplify voices and communities



The popularity of books about issues of race surged in 2020.

Speak to Maati Jone Primm, and you’ll swear you are speaking with a proud parent – who happens to be a little surprised to be a parent.

She’s the fifth owner of the 83-year-old Marshall’s Bookstore and Music, a mainstay in the Fairview District of Jackson, Mississippi, a residential-commercial area that was a welcoming home for Black businesses and consumers. When Primm moved south from Minnesota in 2006, her plan was to grow the bookstore, which is known for its Christian literature and its access to sheet music, and then become a silent partner.

But Primm, who spoke to *Unity* in fall 2021, realized there was work to be done in Jackson, and she knew the store could play a major role. She began by building the store’s selection.

“When I first got here, 15 years ago, we had maybe two titles that dealt with anything like Black culture, per se. Since I’ve been here, we’ve added and added and added, and now we have hundreds.”

And hundreds were what she needed. In 2020, as the world shut down, the popularity of books surged. Much of the attention was prompted by the desire among Americans to deepen their knowledge about issues of race following the videotaped murder of George Floyd Jr., and there was a push to support Black-owned businesses rather than big-box stores.

“Before (2020), the majority of our sales were Christian. Now we’re seeing a great deal more sales of Black history books,” she says.

It is a bittersweet realization.

Before 2020, Black-owned bookstores filled a void that often was felt in mainstream stores. In a Black-owned store, the vastness of African American culture and experiences spans the shelves through books with characters who are of color and that are written by authors of color. They are front and center, rather than an afterthought, and not segregated into a different section.

Black-owned stores are gathering spaces for activism and book launches by Black authors, and they provide a variety of culturally aware titles that encourage literacy, entertainment, and historical and social awareness. They also provide a space of radical acceptance.

Determining the number of stores is tricky, but it is a small percentage of all bookstores. In 2020, [CNN Business](#) said, “There are some 130 Black-owned bookstores in the U.S., according to a list maintained by the African American Literature Book Club. That’s about 5% of the roughly 2,500 independent bookstores in the country.”

An August 2020 article in [Oprah Daily](#) listed [125 bookstores](#) that identified as Black-owned, and a 2021 article on [bookshop.org](#) named 119.

Several bookstores with African American proprietors have opened during the pandemic, including [Black Garnet Books](#) in Minneapolis, which was launched online by entrepreneur Dionne Sims after she

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In the book "Let My People Vote," Desmond Meade shares his personal story and account of his political activism. Photos courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



Desmond Meade's honors include being named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine.

Voting crusader earns MacArthur Grant

Desmond Meade, president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition and a civil rights advocate working on voting and criminal justice reform, has won a 2021 [MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Grant](#).

"It's a huge honor and I'm still trying to process it," Meade shared on "Making the Case With Yodit" in September 2021. "It seemed so surreal. I never would have dreamed I would receive something like the MacArthur genius fellowship. ..."

Meade is one of two formerly incarcerated recipients of the 2021 MacArthur fellowships. The foundation also awarded the grant to Reginald Dwayne Betts, a poet, lawyer and clinical lecturer at Yale Law School. He was convicted of hijacking a car at gunpoint while he was a teenager.

"When you allow people like me second chances," said Meade, "as you can see, we can go all the way to the top."

The coveted fellowship, popularly known as the genius grant, comes with an unrestricted \$625,000 award, the recipients of which are "individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction," according to the MacArthur website. The award may be used for research, career advancement or even a career change.

Meade guided the [FRRRC](#) to a 2018 win with the passage of Florida's Fourth Amendment, which restored voting rights to more than 1.4 million

in the state who had past felony convictions, effectively killing a law from the Jim Crow era. Formerly homeless and formerly incarcerated, Meade knew the stigma applied to those with previous convictions, which often restricts their access to voting rights, housing, financial assistance and professional licensure. Specifically in Florida, checking the box that applied the label of "convicted" meant a permanent ban from voting or holding public office.

The campaign that Meade created enabled formerly incarcerated people to speak for themselves, rather than speak through representation, and meet with lawmakers and community leaders. His efforts aim at reshaping criminal justice policies at all levels of politics and law.

According to the [Tampa Bay Times](#), the restoration of Meade's civil rights in October 2021 allows him to run for office and serve on a jury.

Meade is a guest columnist for HuffPost, and authored the book "[Let My People Vote: My Battle to Restore the Civil Rights of Returning Citizens](#)," his personal story and account of his political activism. He is a graduate of Florida International University College of Law, but, due to his conviction, he was not allowed to sit for Florida's bar exam.

Time magazine recognized Meade in 2019 as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World, and he was named Floridian and Central Floridian of the Year in 2019.

Poignant, evocative representations on canvas

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Works by the artists in this edition of *Unity* reflect their individual African Diaspora experiences.

AARON FISHER

Born in Princeton, New Jersey, Aaron Fisher's artistic expression emerged as soon as he could hold a crayon. His artistic sister encouraged him to hone his gift. Fisher majored in marketing and art and design at Middlesex College in Edison, New Jersey, and soon began airbrush painting on textiles at a local flea market. He eventually transitioned to his medium of choice – acrylic on canvas – which is represented in the three pieces selected for this publication.



"King" by Aaron Fisher

Fisher's palette consist of mostly variations of blacks, browns, reds and oranges to make up the beautiful skin tones of people of African descent. One of Fisher's favorite pieces, "King," incorporates those palettes, ranging from rich caramels to warm tones of chocolate browns with a sprinkled softness of blended light across the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s cheeks and forehead. King's eyelids are accentuated with a perfect blend of black in the corners of his eyes.



"Billie" by Aaron Fisher

Fisher remarks that after seeing Cornel West at numerous speaking engagements, he regarded him as a unique character and wanted to bring that

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Fisher says he painted "Billie" after listening to Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit." The black-and-white color scheme is reminiscent of the singer's bygone era. Viewers may note the minute color contrast of red in Holiday's jeweled earrings as well as the subtlety of the veins in her neck.



"Wild, Wild West" by Aaron Fisher

"whimsical air of distinction" to canvas in his piece, "Wild, Wild West."

Fisher's work has been exhibited throughout New Jersey as well as in the collections of actor Avery Brooks, and singers Evelyn "Champagne" King and Bette Midler.

DAVID FULTON

David Fulton was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and raised in Virginia Beach, Virginia. As a child, Fulton was gifted with the ability to draw and his creations garnered positive responses from family and friends. His ability was nurtured throughout his teenage years.

After high school, he attended Hampton University in Virginia and graduated with a bachelor's degree in advertising. During the beginning of his career in advertising sales, Fulton developed a talent for painting and began sharing his work at local art festivals and small galleries in Charlotte, North Carolina. At that point, his passion for, and career in, painting was born.



"Beloved" by David Fulton

Fulton attributes his attraction to colors and nature to his roots in West Africa. Recalling a trip to West and South Africa, he says memories of the oceans and sunsets are present in his work.

"Beloved," oil on canvas, is Fulton's portrayal of renown author Toni Morrison.

His paintbrush shows wisps of Morrison's natural hair gradually spun into soft locs of gray with pale blue highlights on her tan face and hands. "I chose a simple black background to keep the focus on the captivating beauty of her face, eyes and locs, Fulton declares.



"Architect of Equality" by David Fulton

The rich tones of brown in "Architect of Equality" personify the strength of Thurgood Marshall. The background above the books appear as trees bearing the hushed colors of autumn.

"Shero" was created shortly after Fulton's visit to Africa. "I wanted to paint this piece to capture Harriet Tubman's courageous spirit," Fulton says. "For me," he continues, "the colors in her head scarf embody her spirit and the spirit of Africa."



"Shero" by David Fulton

Fulton's body of work has graced exhibition walls in local galleries and museums in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a 7-by-15 work is installed at an elementary school library in Washington, D.C.

MARKENZY CESAR

Markenzy Cesar remembers growing up in Haiti in a half-finished hotel owned by his godfather, where he would spend time alone watching sunlight streaming through colored glass ceiling tiles that reminded him of being inside a church.

"I would climb onto the roof regularly to remove the dirt from them," he says. "The intrinsic beauty of those windows encouraged me to communicate with people through my art." Cesar believes those

moments of solitude inspired him to become an artist. He attended and earned a BFA from the State University of New York College in Buffalo.



"Talking about Michelangelo" by Markenzy Cesar

Cesar's work presented in this publication are oil on canvas. "Talking about Michelangelo" is a line from a poem by T.S. Elliot that imagines sedate, mature women discussing art at a social event. Cesar says he flipped the script by portraying "younger women



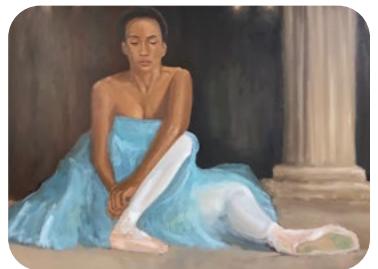
"Feel the Spirit" by Markenzy Cesar

standing and talking and giggling in short shorts." He says his desire to show unity is indicated by the diversity in the girls' skin colors.

In "Feel the Spirit," Cesar hopes viewers can tap into the experience of hanging out under a large shade tree while listening to the beat of the drum and watching the rhythmic movement of dance.

"Sitting Ballerina," Cesar says, allows him to indulge in the juxtaposition of color. He wanted to show the ballerina's skin color against varying tints of aqua and a darkened background. Her pensive look is one of resolve to be seen not only as a Black ballerina, but as a graceful one as well.

Cesar teaches art in after-school programs and is a soccer coach for children in his Buffalo, New York, community.



"Sitting Ballerina" by Markenzy Cesar

Chef's local venture morphs into a nationwide enterprise

Like many people who end up in the culinary arts, Chef Maria Kemp's journey began in her mother's kitchen. From upstate New York to Illinois to North Carolina, where she now resides (and other stops in between), Kemp maintained her passion for pastry. That was true even during the 20-plus years she spent working in the IT field.

Everything changed after Kemp enrolled in Chicago's [French Pastry School](#) and embarked on its rigorous, six-month curriculum that culminated with her earning the L'Art de la Pâtisserie certificate in 2007. The following year, she opened Decadence Bakery & Pastries, a storefront artisan shop, in Illinois. In 2014, Kemp launched [Beyond Decadence](#), also in Illinois, as a pop-up bakery. She moved the business to North Carolina in 2017.

Today, Beyond Decadence is an online artisan bakery located near Charlotte, specializing in handcrafted, gourmet desserts and myriad baking experiences.

Unity interviewed Kemp in early December 2021. Her responses have been edited for length.

Q. What was the most valuable lesson you learned at The French Pastry School?

A. Something that occurred on the first day of pastry school while we were still in a classroom has stuck with me for 14 years now. The chef said, "Here are the books; you can take them and leave now, but you'll miss a lot. There are a lot of things we'll tell you and show you along the way that aren't in the books."

As trivial as that may seem, it really wasn't. For me, it served as a constant reminder that there's always more to a recipe than what's written on the page and until you try/test it, you don't know what you don't know.

I graduated The French Pastry School in December 2007, and I still literally learn something new every day and have notes scribbled all over my recipes. The learning doesn't stop just because I have a fancy 20K certificate in French with my name on it.



"My ultimate goal is to have my own baking show on the Food Network or another popular cooking/baking network," says Chef Maria Kemp, owner and founder of Beyond Decadence. "I have zero desire to compete in a baking competition to get there."

Photo by Juan Zambrano Photography

Q. What are some of the turning points in your baking career?

A. There have been many blessings from God along the way. However, the most notable in my journey was on Sept. 22, 2020, when NBC randomly selected me to join (businessman and TV personality) Marcus Lemonis on his Instagram Live show. Marcus introduced himself and asked what business problem could he help with. I didn't know how long I had, so I hit the ground running and laid out my challenges with bounce rate, conversion and SEO issues. 12:43 minutes later he had offered me three amazing \$10,000 solutions to choose from.

I selected the website redesign and SEO optimization. Within a week or two, I was knee-deep in conversations and planning sessions with Blackdog Advertising in Miami to overhaul my website. I had complete control over the project and had a phenomenal working relationship with the Blackdog team. I sent desserts to Miami and their food stylist made them look even more decadent with new professional photos.

Over the next five months, there were millions of emails, video conferences and phone calls to walk through every aspect of the new website. Behind

the scenes, Marcus paid the bill and I gave the green light to launch the new website on March 3, 2021. You can certainly call this turning point No. 1, but it should really be counted for 1,000 turning points!

The second major turning point was a byproduct of the new website. As I started courting new corporate clients, the first thing they would do was visit my website. Once there, my story and the videos drew them in. This new website turning point led right into my Minority Business Enterprise certification, which gave me a seat at the table right next to the supplier diversity contacts for Fortune 50 and Fortune 100 companies.

Q. What impact did COVID and the shutdown have on your business?

A. Prior to COVID, no other bakeries were really offering/marketing a delivery service unless they were catering an event. Once COVID hit, every bakery was offering delivery or curbside pickup. The delivery “space” got crowded very quickly. I was losing money trying to compete with them by offering too many perks on relatively small purchases to simply stay in the game.

After one particularly long day of deliveries all around Huntersville, I decided to pause the business to figure out how to adjust under our new norm. When I resumed, I introduced a pivot! (The word “pivot” is the most overused word of 2021, so I prefer the word “morph.”) With the morph,

I introduced nationwide shipping and private virtual baking experiences.

Q. What new ventures are you pursuing?

A. When I first started offering the private virtual baking experiences, I offered them to the general public – adults and kids. However, as they’ve evolved I’ve been pursuing more corporate clients for the private virtual and on-site baking experiences. Corporate clients can easily fill an entire class and have ongoing team-building or activity needs.

I’m also moving into doing more teaching, public speaking and videos – all on baking or entrepreneurship topics.

Q. Where do you bake your pastries?

A. I am fully licensed and insured in two different locations. I have a home-certified kitchen in Huntersville and rent usage of a shared commercial kitchen in Charlotte.

Q. What’s your favorite dessert to eat?

A. I know I should come up with some fancy, froufrou dessert, but that’s just not who I am. I’m happy to make fancy, froufrou desserts for my clients, but at the end of the day I still have an unnatural addiction to mini-unwrapped Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, raw cookie dough or cookies on the edge of being slightly underbaked.

Follow [@beyonddecadence](https://www.instagram.com/beyonddecadence) on Instagram.



Lemon bars are Beyond Decadence's top-selling item. Photo by Blackdog Advertising

Black-owned bookstores amplify voices and communities

Continued from page 2

discovered there were no Black-owned bookstores in the state. Sims sponsors pop-up shops in various spaces.

Some owners have taken literature outside of the four walls. Victoria Scott-Miller of [Liberation Station Bookstore](#) in Raleigh, North Carolina, offers the “Dreaming in Color” series of online readings for children and their families. In partnership with the North Carolina Museum of Art, these readings open a path for book discovery, using the words and the background of the museum’s art to build both story and community.

Danielle “Danni” Mullen, the proprietor and founder of [Semicolon](#) bookstores in Chicago, plans to keep going with brick and mortar. Sales in 2020, she said, were phenomenal, so much so that she is planning expansions in 2022 to Miami and New York, adding to the two stores currently in Chicago. One of them is the nonprofit [Paren\(t\)hesis](#), which provides books at no cost to help close the literacy gap.

The additional revenue earned in 2020, notes Mullen, has allowed Semicolon to grow staff and be more effective in building relationships in the communities to which they already physically belong. But Mullen also looks at community in a broader term.

Most of Semicolon’s business came from non-Black consumers, Mullen says, which puts the store, in theory, into different communities, and that sets the stage for other options.

“Being in those spaces – the hope is we can build empathy,” she says.



In a typical Black-owned bookstore, literature written by Black authors about characters of color are front and center, not segregated in one section of the store.

Mullen’s largest sellers have been the graphic novel “Pumpkin Heads” by Rainbow Rowell, Jory John’s “The Bad Seed” and “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Maya Angelou.

And she sees a bigger picture. The store is a business, but it’s also an outreach, and “wherever we are, we make a point to become not just a business, but a community member.

“We have programs that give free books to students, and we host literacy programs. We raised \$250,000 on GoFundMe to give books away to high schoolers and middle schoolers. We try not to ask for people to donate, but that’s the difference books make.”



Although their popularity has increased, Black-owned bookstores make up a small segment of the total bookseller market.

On the cover: Across the U.S., several bookstores with Black proprietors have opened during the pandemic. Published six times per year, *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com. ©2022 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by [Content Spectrum](#).

