

Carson L. Tomony

San Francisco's "First Family": The Legacy of America's Oldest Black-Owned Bookstore and Its Founders

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the history and legacy of Marcus Books, America's oldest Black-owned bookstore. Using six decades of newspaper articles from the San Francisco Chronicle and Oakland Tribune, it addresses Julian and Raye Richardson's journey to opening the store in San Francisco in 1960, their experiences and contributions in the decades that followed, and the lasting legacy of the store and its founders. The author argues that Marcus Books provided Black residents with a sense of community amid urban displacement, that it educated and hosted numerous activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and that the Richardsons played a crucial role in establishing the nation's first Black and Ethnic Studies programs.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; United States of America (USA); San Francisco, California; Oakland, California; Black bookstores; Marcus Books; Julian and Raye Richardson; Civil Rights Movement; Black Power Movement; Black Arts Movement*

Introduction

George Floyd was murdered three miles from my college dorm on May 25, 2020. When I heard the news, I had just finished my freshman year at Augsburg University in Minneapolis and was trying to adapt to living in the COVID-19 pandemic like the rest of the world. While I admired those who regularly participated in Black Lives Matter protests, I ultimately wanted to contribute to the fight against police brutality and systemic racism without jeopardizing the health of my parents, whom I had just moved back in with. As an aspiring teacher, I decided that educating myself on the history of race relations in America would be a good place to start, so I followed dozens of antiracist activists, educators, and authors on Twitter, and I read anything and everything they recommended, especially books by Black authors.

One day, I came across a Tweet by another avid reader in the Twin Cities named Dionne Sims. It read, "Minnesota doesn't have a black-owned bookstore. I think that's my new dream."¹ The post went viral, and by the summer of 2020, Sims had officially established Black Garnet Books in St. Paul, six miles from my college campus and 10 miles from where Floyd's life had tragically been taken. With books from some of my favorite authors, including Jason Reynolds, Angie Thomas, Isabel Wilkerson, and Ibram X. Kendi, it quickly became my preferred bookstore in the Twin Cities.

Many scholars have explored the history of Black-owned bookstores. For example, in *From Head Shops to Whole Foods* (2020), historian Joshua Clark Davis notes that about 100 Black entrepreneurs opened bookstores in the 1960s and 1970s to promote Black consciousness, create safe spaces where Black people could network and socialize, and foster self-

¹ Gia Vang, "Black Garnet Books looks to be only Black-owned bookstore in Twin Cities," *Kare11*, July 9, 2020, [online](#).

sufficiency.² However, the actual bookstores leading this charge, the people running them, and their impacts on their communities have received little more than the occasional case study or sidebar. In this article, I aim to investigate the ways in which Marcus Books, America's oldest Black-owned bookstore, has served its Bay Area community since Julian and Raye Richardson founded it in 1960. By doing so, we can come to appreciate the experiences and contributions of those at Black bookstores on a more meaningful level, understand these stores' roles within their communities, and recognize the importance of supporting such businesses today.

1. Julian and Raye Richardson's Journey to Marcus Books

From the beginning of World War I (1914) until the end of the Civil Rights Movement (1968), six million Black Southerners migrated to northern cities to escape the racial caste system of the rural South, an exodus that would come to be known as the Great Migration.³ During this period, every Black family in the South had to make the difficult decision of staying in a Ku Klux Klan-ridden sharecropping society or leaving everyone and everything they knew to go live in the North, where schools and public facilities were often just as segregated and white folks were often just as racist. Julian Richardson's family chose the former, while Raye's chose the latter.

Julian Richardson was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916.⁴ While Jim Crow infiltrated every part of the South, Birmingham was the mecca of racial discrimination. Julian grew up with segregated housing, public transportation, restaurants, sports, and anything else one could think of. Black residents had no access to parks, libraries, zoos, and other public amenities until after Julian graduated from college.⁵ With policies like these, it is no wonder that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. later declared Birmingham the most segregated city in America.⁶ Despite the racism they endured, Julian's parents kept him and his seven siblings where they were and carved out an impressive life for themselves.⁷ His mother wanted her children to be aware and proud of their people's history, so she gave her boys the names of heroic Black historical figures for middle names. She chose the middle name Attucks for Julian, after Crispus Attucks, a victim of the Boston Massacre (1770) who helped spark the American Revolutionary War.⁸ Julian's father was a coal miner who "no one in his right mind would have called 'boy.'"⁹ Even beyond his parents, Julian grew up surrounded by Black

² Joshua Clark Davis, "Liberation Through Literacy: African American Bookstores, Black Power, and the Mainstreaming of Black Books," in *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 37–38.

³ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Random House, 2010), 9.

⁴ Lee Hubbard, "Black Bookstores Fight To Stay Alive," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 10, 2000.

⁵ Charles E. Connerly, "Planning and Jim Crow," in *"The Most Segregated City in America": City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920–1980* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), 36–37.

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 11.

⁷ Chauncey Bailey, "Julian Richardson, 84, of Marcus Books, dies," *Oakland Tribune*, August 23, 2000.

⁸ Lori Olszewski, "Black Bookstore Desperate for Surprise Ending," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 26, 1994.

⁹ Brenda Payton, "One for the books," *Oakland Tribune*, October 10, 1982.

excellence. All but one of his siblings attended college, which was almost unprecedented for a Black family in the 1930s.¹⁰

Raye Gilbert was born four years after Julian, her future husband, in Brinkley, Arkansas. When she was a young girl, her family decided to leave the Jim Crow South, and they headed north in search of something better. In choosing where to go, they followed the path of the Great Migration. According to journalist Isabel Wilkerson's monograph *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), the Great Migration had three main streams, which were "so predictable that by the end of the Migration, and, to a lesser degree, even now, one can tell where a black northerner's family was from just by the city the person grew up in."¹¹ Families from Arkansas most often migrated to Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, or their satellite communities.¹² Raye's family chose the Chicago area, settling down in Waukegan, Illinois,¹³ an industrializing city on the shore of Lake Michigan that offered most of the economic opportunities Chicago did, albeit without the traffic, congestion, and extracurriculars. They were not alone in their thinking, as Waukegan became a popular destination for Black families in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴

While they took different paths to get there, both Julian and Raye wound up at Tuskegee Institute, a historically Black college in Julian's native Alabama. Raye was a freshman when Julian was a senior, but the school was small enough that everyone bumped into each other sooner or later. Case in point, as part of Raye's scholarship requirements, she looked after an elderly professor emeritus in the school's agricultural department¹⁵ who happened to live in a suite in Julian's dorm.¹⁶ That man was George Washington Carver, the revolutionary agricultural scientist who modernized the cultivation of peanuts.¹⁷

When Raye first laid eyes on Julian in 1937, she knew he was "the one." She asked him to marry her the day they met. More accurately, she told him he would be marrying her.¹⁸ Julian told her to "go home and grow up," and that she "didn't even smell like a big girl." According to Raye, she went home, grew up, and waited to ask him again.¹⁹ When Julian graduated, he took his lithography degree and his suitcase and went up and down the country looking for a job.²⁰ During this time, Raye kept tabs on him by having those of her old classmates who worked as Pullman porters write to her every time they saw him.²¹

¹⁰ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

¹¹ Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, 178.

¹² Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, 178.

¹³ Paul Cobb, "Dr. Raye Richardson 'Woman of the Decade,'" *Oakland Post*, January 7, 2010.

¹⁴ Waukegan Historical Society, Museums and Library, [online](#).

¹⁵ Ishmael Reed, "Keepin' On, the Richardson Dynasty," *Alta*, January 23, 2024, [online](#).

¹⁶ Teresa Moore, "Key Outlet for Writings by and About Blacks," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 27, 1995.

¹⁷ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

¹⁸ Herbert A. Sample, "S.F. area hopes swinging beat of the past returns," *Sacramento Bee*, October 23, 2005.

¹⁹ Brenda Payton, "Fond remembrances of Julian 'Rich' Richardson," *Oakland Tribune*, August 24, 2000.

²⁰ "In Memoriam: Julian Richardson," *The Black Scholar* 30, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2000): 66.

²¹ Chip Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder Left Blacks a Legacy of Knowledge," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 24, 2000.

Five years later, after Raye graduated, she chased after Julian and proposed to him "with his back to the Pacific Ocean." With World War II under way, Julian figured that being married might save him from being drafted, so he said "yes."²² They went on to be married for 58 years, and their daughter Blanche, one of their children, said they were in love for every minute of it.²³ When Julian died in 2000, a reporter congratulated Raye on being married 58 years. She replied, "And he owed me five. If he had married me when I asked him, we would have had five more years."²⁴

After they wed, Julian and Raye moved to Los Angeles, where they lived until Julian got drafted into the army, despite his marital status.²⁵ When he returned from the war, they relocated to San Francisco, which Julian thought would be a better place to start a printing business.²⁶ That may have been true, but San Francisco was not an easy place for a Black couple to find housing in the mid-1940s. With racially restrictive housing covenants barring people of color from buying and renting properties in most of the city²⁷ and Black people mostly unable to rent hotel rooms,²⁸ their options were severely limited. Luckily, they met a man at the train station who offered to let them stay with his family in the Fillmore District. Having nowhere else to go, the Richardsons accepted the offer and moved in with the man, his wife, and his wife's 14-year-old daughter.²⁹ They lived with this family for several years, and Raye and Julian became something of an aunt and uncle to the girl. Once, she wanted to go to a school dance, but her mother said she could only go if Julian chaperoned, so he did. At some point, Julian gave the girl a collection of poetry as a gift. She had been enthralled with books and poetry for years but had never owned her own book, and it became one of her prized possessions. She studied the structure and flow of her favorite poems and practiced writing her own, developing into an exceptional writer and poet over time. One of the best ever. That girl's name was Maya Angelou.³⁰

When the Richardsons first arrived in San Francisco in the mid-1940s, the city was predominantly white. In the words of one journalist, "there were almost no black folks and no black-eyed peas."³¹ That changed quickly. World War II created a plethora of wartime jobs in the Bay Area that Black people moved to the city for, and the internment of Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in many vacant affordable housing units for them to move into. This was especially true in San Francisco, which had the third-largest

²² Susan Lydon, "Bookstore a mecca for city's black readers," *Alameda Times-Star*, January 24, 2002.

²³ Jonathan Tilove, "Changes for King Street," *Oregonian*, January 21, 2002.

²⁴ Payton, "Fond remembrances."

²⁵ Reed, "Keepin' On."

²⁶ Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder."

²⁷ Eli Moore, Nicole Montojo, and Nicole Mauri, *Roots, Race, & Place: A History of Racially Exclusionary Housing in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, 2019), 12, [online](#).

²⁸ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

²⁹ Reed, "Keepin' On."

³⁰ John McMurtrie, "Poet kept close ties with Marcus Books," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 29, 2014.

³¹ Tilove, "Changes for King Street."

Japanese American population in the country.³² As a result, the Bay Area became a prime destination during the Great Migration, and by the late 1940s, the Fillmore had turned into a bustling Black community.³³ Ironically, the Fillmore was named after Millard Fillmore, the thirteenth president of the United States, who signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated that enslaved people who had escaped to free states like California be returned to their masters. Raye Richardson would later become one of the main city leaders to advocate for its renaming, but it remains the Fillmore District to this day.³⁴

After World War II, the Fillmore developed one of the most prolific jazz and blues scenes in the country. The most popular spot in town was Jimbo's Bop City jazz club, a purple and white Victorian that hosted the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane, among others.³⁵ Bop City had the soul of a Black church and the spirit of a Black barbershop, and it remained a nexus for San Francisco's Black community until it fell victim to urban redevelopment in 1965.³⁶

Julian loved the Fillmore's energy and desperately wanted to start a printing business there so he could print for all the Black businesses in the district, but first he needed a job to earn the money to do so. He applied to be a Linotype operator at *The San Francisco Chronicle*, a job he was undoubtedly qualified for, if not overqualified, since he had worked at a print shop all throughout college³⁷ and had a degree in lithography.³⁸ The only problem was that the newspaper did not hire Black people. However, because he was light-skinned, and perhaps because his hiring managers could not imagine that a Black person could have been as educated and experienced as he was, they thought he was white. As much as it pained him to hide the part of his identity he was most proud of, he needed a job. In addition, he knew that it was merely a launching pad for him to do what he really wanted to do, so he took the job and let them believe he was white.³⁹

After a year at *The Chronicle*, Julian resigned. His friends thought he was crazy for walking away from such a position, but he was tired of hiding his Blackness and ready to do his own thing. In 1946, he opened his very own print shop, Success Printing, in the Fillmore.⁴⁰ The first thing he published was a book by one of his all-time favorite Pan-African thinkers, *Philosophy*

³² "Japanese Population by Nativity or Citizenship in Selected Cities in the United States: 1940," U.S. Department of Commerce, December 10, 1941, [online](#).

³³ Jasmine Johnson and Shaun Ossei-Owusu, "'From Fillmore to No More': Black Owned Business in a Transforming San Francisco," in *Black California Dreamin': The Crises of California's African-American Communities*, ed. Ingrid Banks, Gaye Johnson, George Lipsitz, Ula Taylor, Daniel Widener, and Clyde Woods (University of California, Santa Barbara, Center for Black Studies Research, 2012), 76, [online](#).

³⁴ Carolyn Zinko, "Big Fight Likely on Renaming S.F. Street," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 1997.

³⁵ "Six Stores Stocked With Truly Bookish Treats," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 30, 2000. The address of this c. 1893 structure is 1712 Fillmore St, San Francisco, CA 94115.

³⁶ Sample, "S.F. area hopes."

³⁷ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

³⁸ "Dr. Raye Gilbert Richardson, 99, Founder of Marcus Books, Oldest Remaining Black-Owned Bookstore in America," *Post News Group*, February 27, 2020, [online](#).

³⁹ Reed, "Keepin' On."

⁴⁰ Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder."

and *Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, which had gone out of print since its original publication in 1923.⁴¹ In it, Garvey urges every Black man to "never depend upon others to do for him what he ought to do for himself."⁴² Success Printing's beginning was rocky, as the business had to move half a dozen times in its first two years.⁴³ Yet once it had made a name for itself as the go-to print shop for Black businesses in the Fillmore, it settled in nicely. By the late 1940s, Julian was printing for all the Black businesses that lined the Fillmore, just as he had originally envisioned.⁴⁴ From the moment he set up shop, he did everything he could to support the Black entrepreneurs who supported him. In 1959, he published *The Success Directory*, a "Rolodex of black-owned businesses in the city," to help popularize these places.⁴⁵

Julian loved printing, but his and Raye's true passion was books. In fact, according to Julian, their shared love of books is what "caused" them to get married.⁴⁶ They had a knack for finding books by Harlem Renaissance authors that no one else could get their hands on. Throughout the 1950s, they would order such books from two Black-owned bookstores in New York and one in Los Angeles, the only three Black bookstores they knew of.⁴⁷ They developed a reputation for having the best collection of Black literature in town and often found themselves lending books to their friends and not getting them back. They started ordering multiple copies of each book and putting the extras behind the front window of the shop so that their friends and customers could check them out, and they could hold on to their own.⁴⁸ Before they knew it, people came to Success Printing just for these books. Realizing the hunger for Black literature in the community, Julian and Raye decided to turn their side hustle into a business. In 1960, they opened Success Books,⁴⁹ which they soon renamed Marcus Books, after their hero, Marcus Garvey.⁵⁰

One of Marcus Books' first employees was a young man who loved to dance. In fact, he danced on the job so much that everyone called him the "danceman pressman." One day, he got so carried away while shaking and grooving that he dropped a monkey wrench into the Richardsons' brand-new press, which cost about \$10,000 to fix. As one might expect, that young man did not work at Marcus Books much longer, but not for the reason most would think. Rather than firing the young employee, Julian gave him the money to go to New York and try to make it in show business. He did. That man's name was Morgan Freeman.⁵¹

This story may leave the impression that Julian was a man who could afford to send his employees across the country to follow their dreams, but the truth is that Marcus Books' first

⁴¹ Payton, "One for the books."

⁴² Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques Garvey (Universal Publishing House, 1923), 38–39.

⁴³ Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder."

⁴⁴ "Marcus Books," featured in Local Content Videos, C-SPAN, November 1, 2015, [online](#).

⁴⁵ Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 78.

⁴⁶ Payton, "One for the books."

⁴⁷ Brenda Payton, "African American bookstore a jewel," *Oakland Tribune*, October 9, 1990.

⁴⁸ Reed, "Keepin' On."

⁴⁹ Moore, "Key Outlet."

⁵⁰ Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 79.

⁵¹ "Marcus Books," C-SPAN.

few years were lean. The one thing Success Printing had going for itself when it first opened was the city's growing Black population. From 1941, the year the United States entered World War II, to 1950, the city's Black population increased from less than 4,000 to more than 50,000, which made it easier for Black-owned businesses like Success Printing to attract customers.⁵² But by the time the Richardsons launched Marcus Books in 1960, the city's urban renewal projects were actively driving these Black residents out of the city. From the late 1950s through the 1970s, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency displaced more than 20,000 people, a disproportionate number of whom were people of color. Many minority-owned businesses were forced to shut down or relocate, and even the ones that were not directly impacted struggled to survive where they were, as a sizable percentage of their customers were being run out of town.⁵³

In 1963, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency forced Marcus Books out of the Fillmore. The bookstore bounced around the Tenderloin and other districts in the city's Western Addition for years, trying to find its footing.⁵⁴ Raye did her best to help keep small businesses like Marcus Books afloat amid urban renewal and gentrification, later joining San Francisco's Small Business Commission to fight against the displacement of minority-owned businesses.⁵⁵ Despite efforts like these, Marcus Books found itself on the brink of going under just a few years after its original launch.

2. Marcus Books during the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power Movements

Just as urban renewal threatened to kill the Richardsons' dream, the demand for Black literature skyrocketed thanks to the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power movements, all of which were especially vibrant in the Bay Area. For example, San Francisco became a center of the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 and 1964 when the United San Francisco Freedom Movement organized protests against discriminatory businesses.⁵⁶ Shortly thereafter, the Black Arts Movement exploded in the Bay Area thanks to jazz musicians like John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Pharoah Sanders, as well as poets like Sonia Sanchez, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka.⁵⁷ Baraka may have had the greatest impact on both the Black Arts Movement in general and the increased demand for Black literature in particular, as he is known as the "practical inventor of the Black Arts movement" and the "most influential African American author of the 1960s."⁵⁸

⁵² Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 76.

⁵³ Cathy Bussewitz, "Marcus Books blasts to jazz past," *Alameda Times-Star*, March 27, 2006.

⁵⁴ Moore, "Key Outlet."

⁵⁵ Herbert A. Sample, "Raye Richardson had vital role in S.F.'s new African Diaspora museum," *Sacramento Bee*, December 12, 2005.

⁵⁶ "Bay Area Social Justice History Project," San Francisco State University, [online](#).

⁵⁷ Cheryl Clarke, "Black Arts Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 4 vols. (Macmillan Reference, 2007), 1:157.

⁵⁸ "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)," F.B. Eyes Digital Archive: FBI Files on African American Authors and Literary Institutions Obtained through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)," Washington University in St. Louis, [online](#).

If the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements put Black bookstores on the map, the Black Power Movement put them on a pedestal. In 1966, a group of students at San Francisco State College formed the first ever Black Student Union,⁵⁹ and shortly afterward, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton established the Black Panther Party in Oakland.⁶⁰ Suddenly, young Black people thirsted for books about Black history and Black liberation like never before, and Marcus Books was uniquely equipped to satisfy this demand. As a result, the Richardsons' store became profitable for the first time in the late 1960s.⁶¹ With the demand for Black literature high, the Richardsons struck while the press was hot and printed a surplus of works by Black writers. In 1964, Marcus Books started publishing *The Black Dialogue*, a journal run by Black students at San Francisco State⁶² which became the first major publication of the Black Arts Movement.⁶³ In 1970, the bookstore published Ovid P. Adams's *The Adventures of Black Eldridge: The Panther*, a graphic novel about the life of Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information. It became an instant hit.⁶⁴

During these movements, the bookstore also became a meeting space for Black activists and grassroots organizations. It hosted the Black Panther Party, the Association of Black Psychologists, and the US Organization,⁶⁵ a Black nationalist group founded by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the eventual creator of Kwanzaa.⁶⁶ In addition, the bookstore became a lecture room for writers like Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed, who taught and mentored budding Black scholars and student activists.⁶⁷ It should be noted that Marcus Books was not the only Black-owned bookstore to host activists during these movements. According to Joshua Clark Davis, Black bookstores across the United States became spaces where civil rights groups and Black nationalists networked and organized throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s.⁶⁸ One day, a tall, well-dressed man wearing browline glasses came into Marcus Books to see what all the fuss was about. It was Malcolm X. According to Julian, Malcolm had already read just about every book in the store,⁶⁹ but he hung around to talk with Julian about current events impacting the Black community.⁷⁰ Before he left, Julian offered to buy the Muslim

⁵⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 108–109.

⁶⁰ Kendi, *Black Campus Movement*, 79.

⁶¹ Hubbard, "Black Bookstores."

⁶² Simon C. Abramowitsch, "Under the Sign of the Rainbow: Thinking Racial and Ethnic Heterogeneity in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1960s–1990s" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2018), 68.

⁶³ Thomas Aiello, "Black Arts Movement," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, December 1, 2009, [online](#).

⁶⁴ Ovid P. Adams, *The Adventures of Black Eldridge: The Panther* (Marcus Books, 1970).

⁶⁵ Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 80.

⁶⁶ Thaa Walker, "Kwanzaa Celebrations Growing in Popularity in the Bay Area," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 31, 1993.

⁶⁷ Holly McDede, "Marcus Books Is Making a Comeback," *East Bay Express*, August 31, 2011.

⁶⁸ Davis, "Liberation Through Literacy," 37.

⁶⁹ Olszewski, "Black Bookstore."

⁷⁰ Jack Chang, "Bookstore a Landmark in History: African-American Community Helps Marcus Endure," *Contra Costa Times*, January 16, 2005.

minister a porkchop from a nearby restaurant.⁷¹ Few people could have gotten away with such a joke, but Julian did.

From 1958 to 1966, Julian and Raye occasionally sent books to a young man they knew who was serving a prison sentence, and he returned the favor by sending the Richardsons Christmas cards. The man loved these books and began writing his own essays, reflecting on his criminal wrongdoings, race relations in America, and how to move forward as a people. That man was Eldridge Cleaver, who became the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information when he was released from prison in 1966.⁷² Two years later, he published a memoir, *Soul on Ice*, consisting of the essays he had written in prison. By the end of 1968, *The New York Times* listed it as a top-ten book of the year.⁷³ Shortly thereafter, Cleaver and others established the Black House, a Black theater in the Fillmore.⁷⁴ Julian became a regular at the Black House, where he mingled with Black Panthers like Cleaver and Bobby Seale, as well as student activists like Jimmy Garrett and Danny Glover.⁷⁵ It was around this time that Glover, whose parents were friends with the Richardsons,⁷⁶ got his start in acting. Amiri Baraka, who was teaching at San Francisco State, wanted Black student activists in his plays and asked Glover, a member of the school's Black Student Union, whether he would be interested. Glover was not going to turn down his mentor and the pioneer of the Black Arts Movement, so he gave it a go.⁷⁷ He became one of the greatest actors of all time, perhaps best known for his starring role in the *Lethal Weapon* series.

As fruitful as the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power movements were for Black bookstores like Marcus Books, they also triggered backlash from several parties—most notably from the FBI. According to literature scholar William J. Maxwell's monograph *F.B. Eyes* (2015), J. Edgar Hoover directed the Bureau to surveil Black writers and literary institutions throughout the 1960s and early 1970s because he saw them as an extraordinary threat to the status quo.⁷⁸ The FBI did everything in its power to criminalize such individuals and establishments.⁷⁹ In fact, Maxwell suspects that the FBI exhausted more energy surveilling Black writers during the Black Arts Movement than it did Communists during the height of the Cold War.⁸⁰ While we cannot know for certain whether the FBI ever surveilled Marcus Books or the Richardsons, we do know that the FBI accumulated extensive

⁷¹ Lee Hildebrand, "Family keeps shelves full of black culture," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 31, 2010.

⁷² Olszewski, "Black Bookstore."

⁷³ Steve Wasserman, "Eldridge Back On Ice," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 1, 1976.

⁷⁴ Anthony J. Ratcliff, "Liberation at the End of a Pen: Writing Pan-African Politics of Cultural Struggle" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009), 151.

⁷⁵ Jason Michael Ferreira, "All Power to the People: A Comparative History of Third World Radicalism in San Francisco, 1968–1974" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003), 82.

⁷⁶ Judy Masterson, "Raye Richardson among shapers of 20th century culture," *Lake County News-Sun*, April 17, 2003.

⁷⁷ Ibram X. Kendi, "Baraka's Legacy: Let's Not Forget Inaugural Black Studies Professor," *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, January 13, 2014.

⁷⁸ William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.

⁷⁹ Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*, 59.

⁸⁰ Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*, 60.

surveillance files on several people and organizations closely affiliated with the Richardsons,⁸¹ including Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, *The Black Scholar*, and the Black Panther Party.⁸² In addition, the FBI retains more than four decades' worth of files on Marcus Books' namesake, Marcus Garvey.⁸³ Considering that the height of the FBI's surveillance of Black bookstores transpired during the peak of Marcus Books' popularity and that the Bureau surveilled numerous individuals and organizations associated with the bookstore, I find it plausible, if not likely, that the FBI surveilled Marcus Books and the Richardsons at some point from when the store opened in 1960 to when Hoover died in 1972.

Whether or not the Richardsons were ever surveilled by the FBI, they definitely endured their fair share of racism. In 1965, they moved their store to San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood because the roof on their Fillmore store had developed a bad leak. When they opened shop, they found notes slipped under their door from a hotel owner down the street, asking Julian how he liked Cadillacs and white women.⁸⁴ Moreover, Jasmine Johnson, a granddaughter of Julian and Raye, claimed that workers often experienced "white-only-water-fountain-level racism."⁸⁵ Impressively, the Richardsons never let such bigotry stop them from serving their community.

3. Helping Establish the Nation's First Black and Ethnic Studies Programs

One of the most substantial ways the Richardsons served their community was by helping build Black and Ethnic Studies as disciplines in the Bay Area, which began at the college level in the later 1960s. In 1966, women in San Francisco State's newly created Black Student Union launched free after-school tutoring programs in the Bay Area, which inspired young students of color to seek books from places like Marcus Books.⁸⁶ By 1968, many of these students had enrolled at San Francisco State and went all in on trying to swap the school's Eurocentric curriculum for a more inclusive one, which they had been exposed to by the Black literature they read at Marcus Books and similar establishments in these tutoring programs.

In November 1968, students went on strike against the administration, demanding a Black Studies Department and a School of Ethnic Studies. In an attempt to organize enough people for the strike to be successful, students looked to distribute flyers around the Bay Area, explaining their goals and why people should care. But as they went to make these flyers, they realized that the school had shut off their access to its printers. Needing a place that would let them print hundreds of flyers on short notice, they went to Marcus Books and asked the Richardsons for their help. Not only did the Richardsons print the flyers for them,⁸⁷

⁸¹ F.B. Eyes Digital Archive: FBI Files on African American Authors and Literary Institutions Obtained through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)," Washington University in St. Louis, [online](#).

⁸² Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*, 111.

⁸³ "Marcus Garvey," FBI Vault, [online](#).

⁸⁴ Genevieve Stuttaford, "Buttons, Books, Posters," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 2, 1968.

⁸⁵ André Wheeler, "'Economic duress is nothing new': Can America's oldest black bookstore survive the pandemic?" *The Guardian*, May 15, 2020, [online](#).

⁸⁶ Stuttaford, "Buttons, Books, Posters."

⁸⁷ Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 81.

they put up their own house as collateral to bail as many arrested protesters from jail as they could.⁸⁸ During finals week in the spring semester of 1969, students felt that the administration was on the verge of settling, so they recruited Raye and other Black leaders in the Bay Area to speak at a rally to try to get them over the edge.⁸⁹ The strike ended two weeks later, which set in motion the establishment of the nation's first ever Black Studies Department and School of Ethnic Studies.⁹⁰ That fall, Dr. Nathan Hare, Chair of the Black Studies Department, hired Raye as a professor. Coincidentally, Danny Glover was one of Raye's first students.⁹¹ Raye later served as Chair of the Black Studies Department and became its first professor emerita in 1988.⁹²

The same year that San Francisco State hired Raye as a Black Studies professor, the Sausalito School District hired her as its multi-ethnic studies coordinator.⁹³ She used these two platforms to help kids and young adults build cultural literacy and intercultural competence, and she never turned down the chance to expand these programs to other levels. Four years into her tenure at San Francisco State, several of her students approached her and complained about the whitewashed education their kids were receiving in public schools. Rather than sighing it off or passing it on to someone else to try to fix, she took matters into her own hands. She developed the Marcus Saturday School, a program where Black children between the ages of 5 and 10 could learn about Black history and culture while honing their reading and writing skills. Raye recruited a handful of her students at San Francisco State to instruct the children, most of whom were the kids of customers. After two years, Raye turned Marcus Saturday School into Malcolm X School, which taught students the same skills they had been learning on Saturdays but in a formal academic setting. According to Tamiki Johnson, who attended Marcus Saturday School as a kid, students had jumped "two to three years ahead of their age groups" by the time the school transitioned into a public school.⁹⁴

Three decades later, Raye helped to secure the implementation of a historic Ethnic Studies policy in San Francisco's public schools. In March 1998, the San Francisco School Board held a highly contentious meeting over whether high schools should require students to read books by authors of color. Speaking in front of the board, Raye stood up and introduced herself as Raye Richardson, "a product of an education that did not include one black author."⁹⁵ She recited a passage by Geoffrey Chaucer, a fourteenth-century English poet, from a book she had been forced to read in high school and challenged the board to tell her

⁸⁸ Crystal Paul, "A guide to Oakland's rich history and resilience, from a waterfront saloon to Lois the Pie Queen," *The Seattle Times*, June 28, 2018, updated September 4, 2018, [online](#).

⁸⁹ "U.C. Rally Planned By Black Leaders," *Oakland Tribune*, March 9, 1969.

⁹⁰ Helene Whitson, *Strike! A Chronology, Bibliography, and List of Archival Materials Concerning the 1968–1969 Strike at San Francisco State College* (U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, National Institute of Education, 1977), 14–19, [online](#).

⁹¹ Masterson, "Raye Richardson."

⁹² "Directory of Instructional Faculty, Administrators, Librarians, and Student Services Professionals," Emeritus/Emerita Faculty, San Francisco State University, 2013–2014, [online](#).

⁹³ "Multi-Ethnic Coordinator Is Approved," *Mill City Record*, January 29, 1969.

⁹⁴ Johnson and Ossei-Owusu, "From Fillmore to No More," 80–81.

⁹⁵ Nanette Asimov, "School Board Strikes Deal On Books," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 20, 1998.

how that passage was relevant to any of their lives.⁹⁶ After this, she read the summary of Monica Furlong's *Juniper*, a book on the district's required reading list: "Princess Juniper finds her power-mad aunt is using black magic to usurp the throne. Will Juniper's untried white magic be a match for that dark power?" As she explained why it was problematic to teach kids to associate white with good and Black with bad, her opponents began to question their position.⁹⁷ Raye's speech was described by those who witnessed it as "the most moving of all," and shortly after the meeting, the school district became the first in the country to require teachers to assign books by authors of color.⁹⁸

Although Julian did not have the title of teacher, he was a teacher in every sense of the word. One day, a young man found his way into the bookstore from a nearby billiards hall and bought a book by Carter G. Woodson, the "father of Black history" who had created Negro history week, which later turned into Black history month.⁹⁹ Julian was quite familiar with Woodson, as the historian had taught him and Raye at Tuskegee Institute,¹⁰⁰ and he was glad to see that his customer showed an interest in him. Everywhere Julian saw the young man, he had Woodson's book with him. But Julian could tell by the way he held it that he could not read it. Rather than minding his business, Julian gave the young man a children's book about Woodson to steer him in the right direction. He learned to read it and came back for more, so Julian gave him a more challenging book. He and Julian continued this cat-and-mouse game until, eventually, he was reading adult-level books on a regular basis.¹⁰¹

The Richardsons did not just impart knowledge and Black pride to their customers; they instilled it in their employees. A former worker named Solomon Hill said, "Working at Marcus Books changed my life. It taught me about being black. It taught me about who I am."¹⁰² Similarly, Shoshanna Satterfield, Julian and Raye's niece, said, "I was not really black until I started working here."¹⁰³ Another time, a woman noticed her 13-year-old daughter was "hanging out with the wrong crowd," so she brought her to the one man she knew could get her on the right track. She went to Marcus Books and asked Julian if her daughter could work for him. Legally, she was too young to work, but Julian gave her a job anyway. That young girl, Sanya Hill (Maxion), went on to be a Stanford-educated civil rights lawyer, which she said Julian and Marcus Books "had everything to do with."¹⁰⁴

Just as the Richardsons' Black pride and passion for books rubbed off on their customers and employees, Marcus Books paved the way for other Black and minority-owned bookstores to sprout up around it. In the late 1960s, San Francisco State alumnus Jim Gray founded The

⁹⁶ Sample, "Raye Richardson."

⁹⁷ Nanette Asimov, "S.F. High Schools to Get Diverse Authors List," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 21, 1998.

⁹⁸ Asimov, "School Board Strikes Deal."

⁹⁹ Liz Mineo, "Celebrating the founder of Black History Month," *Harvard Gazette*, February 1, 2022, [online](#).

¹⁰⁰ Reed, "Keepin' On."

¹⁰¹ Moore, "Key Outlet."

¹⁰² Sue Hutchison, "'Rich' Filled the Father's Role in the City's 'First Family,'" *Mercury News*, September 3, 2000.

¹⁰³ Olszewski, "Black Bookstore."

¹⁰⁴ Hutchison, "'Rich' Filled the Father's Role."

More Bookstore in the Fillmore.¹⁰⁵ In 1970, the UC Berkeley Asian American Political Alliance opened Everybody's Bookstore in San Francisco's Manilatown-Chinatown to provide books by and about Asian Americans and other people of color.¹⁰⁶ On a national level, approximately 100 Black bookstores emerged in the two decades after Marcus Books had opened in 1960.¹⁰⁷

4. Marcus Books' Impact after the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power Movements

Even after the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power movements had passed, Marcus Books continued to serve as a valuable community asset and a hub for the Bay Area's Black community. First, it opened another store in Oakland in 1976, where Black families from the Fillmore had been migrating for years.¹⁰⁸ It immediately became a "Mecca for black authors and intellectuals."¹⁰⁹ Second, the bookstore leaned into its reputation as a resource for teachers, which it had always been, and not just for Black teachers. In fact, white teachers accounted for as much as half of Marcus Books' customers in some years.¹¹⁰ However, this partnership reached new heights in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, Stanford University's Multicultural Resource Handbook for the San Francisco Bay Area listed Marcus Books as a helpful tool for all educators interested in teaching their students about the history of Africans and African Americans.¹¹¹ Throughout the 1980s, teachers across the Bay Area continued to shop at Marcus Books, especially around Christmas time, as they were preparing for Black History Month.¹¹²

Third, Marcus Books revitalized the Fillmore's original gem in 1981, when it moved into the purple and white Victorian that had been Jimbo's Bop City jazz club all those years before. It brought the soul and spirit back to the space and often paid homage to Bop City by featuring a saxophonist or percussion section in the background to augment its book readings and poetry slams.¹¹³ When the Richardsons left the property in 2014, the city of San Francisco designated the building as a historic landmark, paying respect to both Jimbo's Bop City and Marcus Books. Supervisor London Breed, who made the designation, said he bought his first

¹⁰⁵ Earl Caldwell, "Black Bookstores' Flourish in Literature-Hungry Ghetto," *San Bernardino Sun*, August 22, 1969.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey Dong, "A Bookstore for Everybody," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, Supplement: *Seizing the Moment: Twentieth-Century Chinese American Activism* (January 2009): 122.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, "Liberation Through Literacy," 6.

¹⁰⁸ Chip Johnson, "Bookstore Awaiting New Chapter," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 23, 1999. The address is 3900 Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Oakland, CA 94609.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder."

¹¹⁰ Stuttaford, "Buttons, Books, Posters."

¹¹¹ Vivian Sykes and Terese Tricamo, *Reach: A Multicultural Education Resource Handbook for the San Francisco Bay Area* (Stanford University School of Education, 1977).

¹¹² Marilyn Bailey, "Black History Month is Getting into Gear," *Oakland Tribune*, February 14, 1985.

¹¹³ "Six Stores Stocked With Truly Bookish Treats."

book at Marcus Books, and that being in the space helped him realize that he was "part of a community and a culture bigger than just the housing project"¹¹⁴ he was living in at the time.

While Marcus Books managed to stay more than relevant during the lull in the demand for Black literature in the late 1970s and the 1980s, it fully capitalized on its comeback in the 1990s. In March 1991, the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles ignited a renewed interest in learning about Black history.¹¹⁵ That December, Blanche Richardson said it was an excellent year for the bookstore and that she saw more young Black people buying books than she had in a long time.¹¹⁶ One year later, a jury acquitted the police officers who had brutalized King, which inspired a racial reckoning in which Black literature played a key role. Black bookstores became a place where folks could go to grieve, talk about police brutality and systemic racism, and strengthen their sense of community. Six weeks after the verdict, Marcus Books held a community forum titled "What Lessons Have We Learned?" that drew people from all over the Bay Area.¹¹⁷ In November 1992, director Spike Lee released his blockbuster film *Malcolm X*, starring Denzel Washington, and the demand for Black literature soared once more.¹¹⁸ *Malcolm X* was watched by millions of people across the country, but few could say that they had offered the real Malcolm X a porkchop, and only Julian could say that he had gotten away with it.

As Julian and Raye entered their later years, with Julian looking more and more like his idol, Frederick Douglass,¹¹⁹ and Raye hoping to spend more time with their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, they handed over some of their stores' duties to their offspring: their daughter Blanche took over the Oakland store;¹²⁰ their other daughter, Karen Johnson, together with her own daughter Tamiki assumed control of the San Francisco store; their son William (Billy) took charge at the print shop; and their other son, Mac (Julian, Jr.), helped at the print shop when he was not teaching or disc jockeying.¹²¹ While all of them played substantial roles in sustaining their parents' businesses, Blanche has become the new face of Marcus Books in recent decades. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, she managed to book several famous authors and celebrities for readings and events each month, sometimes attracting crowds so large that people had to be turned away.¹²² When she got Muhammad Ali, a friend of her parents, to come to the Oakland store in 2004, the line outside of Marcus Books was reportedly "four deep and several blocks long."¹²³

¹¹⁴ John Wildermuth, "Marcus Books, Jimbo's Bop City Recognized by City as Historic Landmarks," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 29, 2014.

¹¹⁵ Walker, "Kwanzaa Celebrations."

¹¹⁶ Patricia Abe, "A rise that binds: Even increased book prices can't keep buyers away," *Oakland Tribune*, December 29, 1991.

¹¹⁷ "Panelists to discuss King lessons," *Oakland Tribune*, May 14, 1992.

¹¹⁸ Walker, "Kwanzaa Celebrations."

¹¹⁹ Payton, "One for the books."

¹²⁰ Johnson, "Bookstore Awaiting New Chapter."

¹²¹ Moore, "Key Outlet."

¹²² Payton, "Fond remembrances."

¹²³ Hildebrand, "Family keeps shelves full."

Blanche did not just become the figurehead of Marcus Books but the figurehead of Black bookstores in general. Right around when Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* was released, another blockbuster Black film was in production: *Made in America*, starring Whoopi Goldberg and featuring Will Smith and Nia Long. In the film, Goldberg plays the role of a Black bookstore owner in Oakland, and to design the set, she and her team reached out to the only woman they knew who ran a Black bookstore in Oakland. Blanche accepted the opportunity and helped build a set that loosely resembled Marcus Books.¹²⁴ When *The San Francisco Chronicle* asked Ishmael Reed in 1999 to compile a list of the ten most influential Bay Area Black individuals of the twentieth century, he put Blanche fifth, behind only the late activist Huey P. Newton, former San Francisco Mayor Lionel J. Wilson, *Oakland Tribune* publisher Robert C. Maynard, and Black Repertory Theatre founder Nora Vaughn.¹²⁵

With Julian and Raye's endless connections and Blanche's unparalleled networking skills, the number of cultural icons who have made appearances at Marcus Books is almost unbelievable. Dozens of famous authors have visited, spoken at, or hosted events at the store, including Alice Walker,¹²⁶ Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, Nikki Giovanni, Ishmael Reed, Michael Eric Dyson,¹²⁷ and the Richardsons' old friend Maya Angelou.¹²⁸ In addition to *Malcolm X* and *Eldridge Cleaver*, activists like Rosa Parks¹²⁹ and Cornel West¹³⁰ have spent time at the bookstore, as have some of the greatest athletes ever, including Jackie Robinson,¹³¹ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar,¹³² and the abovementioned Muhammad Ali.¹³³ Musicians who have shopped, performed, or spoken at Marcus Books include B.B. King, Sister Souljah, Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, and the members of "Earth, Wind & Fire."¹³⁴ With Oprah Winfrey rounding out the list,¹³⁵ there may not be another bookstore in the country that has a more impressive all-time roster of customers.

Julian died in his home on August 21, 2000, at 84 years old.¹³⁶ According to Blanche, he died while working on the accounting for Marcus Books.¹³⁷ The funeral had to be delayed by 10 days because the family struggled to find a venue big enough to fit all the people who wanted to pay their respects.¹³⁸ With the service eventually being held at Herbst Theatre in San Francisco,¹³⁹ hundreds of relatives, friends, and admirers attended, including San

¹²⁴ Reed, "Keepin' On."

¹²⁵ "Ishmael Reed's Alternative List," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 19, 1999.

¹²⁶ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

¹²⁷ Reed, "Keepin' On."

¹²⁸ Hildebrand, "Family keeps shelves full."

¹²⁹ Reed, "Keepin' On."

¹³⁰ Chang, "Bookstore a Landmark."

¹³¹ Chang, "Bookstore a Landmark."

¹³² Samantha Schoech, "Black-owned bookstore surging," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 6, 2020.

¹³³ Hildebrand, "Family keeps shelves full."

¹³⁴ Reed, "Keepin' On."

¹³⁵ "S.F.'s historic Marcus Books to reopen in a smaller space," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9, 2016.

¹³⁶ Bailey, "Julian Richardson."

¹³⁷ Payton, "Fond remembrances."

¹³⁸ Johnson, "Marcus Books Founder."

¹³⁹ "Obituaries," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 30, 2000.

Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, the Reverend J. Alfred Smith of Oakland's Allen Temple Baptist Church, and novelist Terry McMillan. Drummers in traditional African robes played African drums, and the legendary jazz pianist Ed Kelley played the piano.¹⁴⁰ Of all the moving speeches made that day, the one given by a man named Rennie Stockard stood out the most. As he reflected on all that Julian and his family had done for him and the Bay Area community, he pronounced the Richardsons the "first family of San Francisco."¹⁴¹

Marcus Books has faced its struggles in recent decades, as people have stopped reading physical books as much as they used to and superstores like Barnes & Noble and Amazon have monopolized the remaining book market. According to Blanche, Marcus Books' sales dropped by 60 percent from 2004 to 2010.¹⁴² On a national level, the number of Black bookstores declined from 325 in 1999 to just 54 in 2014.¹⁴³ In 2009, the Richardsons fell victim to a Ponzi scheme in which dozens of businesses in the area lost a combined \$1,035,000 to a fraudster. As a result, they had to move out of the Bop City location, but they managed to keep their Oakland store up and running through the community's support and their own financial sacrifices.¹⁴⁴ With Julian's death in 2000 and the store's financial struggles afterward, the 2000s were a difficult decade for the Richardsons. However, Raye and her family did not stop serving their community, and that did not go unnoticed. In 2010, Post News Group named Marcus Books a "Business of the Decade" and Raye a "Person of the Decade."¹⁴⁵

Raye died on February 11, 2020, at 99 years old.¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she did not receive the well-deserved memorial service of the same magnitude that Julian had received. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, Marcus Books almost closed its doors for the last time. Poetically, it would be the community that Marcus Books and the Richardsons had served for 60 years that would save them. On April 8, 2020, a GoFundMe campaign was launched by Folasade Adesanya, a regular at Marcus Books and the founder of the Black Syllabus, a Black book club in Oakland. It raised over \$200,000 in its first two months. This sum was not the result of a few massive donors putting the business on its back, but of more than 4,000 customers and supporters who sent in their donations.¹⁴⁷ As a result, the bookstore still stands today at 3900 Martin Luther King Jr. Way in Oakland.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ Brenda Payton, "Oakland eulogizes a mentor," *Oakland Tribune*, September 1, 2000.

¹⁴¹ Hutchison, "'Rich' Filled the Father's Role."

¹⁴² Hildebrand, "Family keeps shelves full."

¹⁴³ Alex Green, "A New Generation of African-American-Owned-Bookstores," *Publishers Weekly*, April 6, 2018, [online](#).

¹⁴⁴ McDede, "Marcus Books."

¹⁴⁵ Cobb, "Dr. Raye Richardson."

¹⁴⁶ "Dr. Raye Gilbert Richardson, 99, Founder of Marcus Books."

¹⁴⁷ Schoech, "Black-owned bookstore surging."

¹⁴⁸ For the recent media coverage of Marcus Books (a testament to the store's ongoing relevance), see, for example, Reyna Harvey, "Nation's oldest Black-owned bookstore stands as a beacon," *KRON4 News*, February 20, 2025, [online](#); John Burns, "Blanche Richardson and the Oldest U.S. Black-Owned Bookstore," *1000 Libraries Magazine*, March 31, 2025, [online](#); "The Oldest Black Bookstore and the Newest Fight: From the Fillmore to Oakland, Marcus Books tracks America's shifting ground—economic, cultural, and political," *KOLUMN Magazine*,

Conclusion

From 1960 through the present, Marcus Books has been a pillar of the Bay Area, a community that the Richardsons have served in a myriad of ways. They kept the Black pride in the Fillmore when redevelopers were driving residents of color from their homes. They educated and hosted the movers and shakers of the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power movements, and they have continued to circulate Black literature even when it has not been trendy. Their books remain stacked on the shelves of teachers of all races dedicated to using a diverse array of works in their curricula. The Black and Ethnic Studies programs they initiated at every level have broadened the horizons of hundreds of thousands of kids and young adults in the Bay Area and beyond. They have empowered their employees not just to contribute to society, but to be stars, and their kids and grandkids not just to carry on their legacy, but to create their own. As small, independent, minority-owned bookstores fade into the cracks of the Barnes & Nobles of the world, one must not forget the value of enterprises like Marcus Books, nor the power that we as a community have to ensure that they never go away.

While this article has shed light on the importance of Black-owned bookstores within their communities, the historical need for Black-owned bookstores deserves more attention. For example, when Julian was growing up in segregated Birmingham, he had no access to public libraries. When Black people wanted to read, they had to go to formal or, more often, informal Black-owned bookstores or peruse their churches' Sunday School libraries. Hence, I would like to see more research on how segregated libraries and other factors led to the creation of Black-owned bookstores, and how the role and importance of these stores have changed over time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Carson L. Tomony of Madison, Wisconsin, earned his B.A. in History (2023) at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he is a member of the Alpha-Mu-Lambda Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society), and he earned his M.A. in History (2026) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). The article published above originated in a graduate seminar in American History offered by CSUF's Department of History.*