

Una Mulzac, Black Women Booksellers, and Pan-Africanism

By [Joshua Clark Davis](#) September 19, 2016

**This is the third post in a new [blog series on Women, Gender and Pan-Africanism](#) edited by [Keisha N. Blain](#). Blog posts in this series will examine how [women and gender have shaped Pan-Africanist movements and discourses](#) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. In this post, historian Joshua Davis explores the historical significance of Harlem bookstore owner Una Mulzac.*

Una Mulzac wanted to make a career for herself in the literary world. It was the early 1960s, and the most common way of breaking into publishing was to secure an entry-level position at a major press in Manhattan. Mulzac found work at Random House as a secretary—but within a few years she became bored with her desk job. Instead of looking for a position with another publisher in New York, Mulzac emigrated to British Guiana, in early 1963. There, she joined the [People's Progressive Party \(PPP\)](#), an anti-colonial group pushing for Guyanese independence led by [Cheddi Jagan](#), an American-educated, ethnic Indian Marxist who served for three years as the colony's Premier.

Mulzac's move might have seemed an odd choice for an American woman with career ambitions in publishing in the early 1960s, but it reflected a family history that had long fused professional pursuits with politics and pan-Africanism. Una's father, [Hugh Mulzac](#), was a native of the British Caribbean colony of St. Vincent and the first Black man to command a ship in the U.S.

Merchant Marine. Yet the senior Mulzac was also an unrepentant radical who had worked for [Marcus Garvey's](#) Black Star line in the 1920s and later enjoyed ties to the [Communist Party USA \(CPUSA\)](#) and the American Labor Party.

After arriving in British Guiana, Una Mulzac quickly assumed the responsibility of operating the party's Progressive Book Store. As Jagan's supporters struggled for Guyanese independence, political strife and violence between the PPP and the U.S.-backed People's National Congress (PNC) marred the country. One day, in July 1964, a customer left an unmarked package in the store and quickly walked away. When party member and bookstore employee [Michael Forde](#) tried to remove the package from the store, a bomb hidden inside exploded and killed him and fellow party member Edward Griffith. [Mulzac was severely wounded](#) and hospitalized for weeks, but stayed in the country for two more years after recovering. When the PNC took power in the newly independent Guyana in 1966, it denied Mulzac a visa to stay in the country. Mulzac returned to New York City in spring 1967 and promptly opened a bookstore in Harlem.¹

Mulzac named the shop Liberation Bookstore and operated it as an information center serving the Progressive Labor Party (PLP), the Marxist-Leninist organization in which Mulzac was an active member. Soon after opening, the Party praised the store in its newspaper, *Challenge*, for answering "a crying need for the revolutionary works from China, Asia, Africa, Latin America and on the Black Liberation struggle here in the U.S."²

By early 1969, however, Mulzac had veered from the party's Marxist-Leninist line and was stocking ever more black nationalist and pan-Africanist works. Eventually, Mulzac seized control of Liberation and made it her own business when she changed the locks, in turn prompting her excommunication from the PLP. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation developed a keen

interest in the store.³

Mulzac quickly established Liberation as one of the key pan-Africanist public spaces in Harlem, perhaps second only to the [National African Memorial Bookshop](#), owned and operated by Garveyite and black nationalist Lewis Michaux since the early 1930s. “Have you picked up on ‘Wretched of the Earth’ by Fanon?” an advertisement for the store asked. Liberation’s logo dramatized Mulzac’s unconventional approach to entrepreneurship. It featured an upraised, shackled black hand breaking free from a chain, above which appeared the message, “If you don’t know, learn. If you know, teach.” As Mulzac would later explain, the purpose behind her store was “not a matter of sales. It’s not a question of bookselling...It’s the raising of consciousness.”⁴ After Michaux’s store closed in 1974, Liberation would become the leading pan-Africanist bookstore in Harlem, a title it retained for decades until it closed in 2007.

Mulzac was just one of a cohort of radical African American entrepreneurs in the late 1960s and 1970s who established bookstores to advance the causes of black nationalism, pan-Africanism, and anti-colonial struggles. At stores like Liberation, customers talked with storeowners and other community members about Black-authored books, Black history, and African affairs. Booksellers decorated their stores with African art, which they sold alongside [African music](#). Stores like Timbuktu in Atlanta, Talking Drum in Portland, Sundiata in Denver, and Uhuru in Greensboro, North Carolina invoked African imagery and words in their names, while other names such as the Afro-Asia Bookstore in Buffalo affirmed a shared struggle for liberation in the developing world. Booksellers carried magazines and journals that regularly reported on events in Africa, including *Black World*, *African World*, and *Freedomways*. The pan-Africanist journal *Presence Africaine* was a particular inspiration to African American booksellers. Founded by the Senegalese writer Alioune Diop in Paris in 1947 as the unofficial headquarters

of the Negritude movement, the journal operated a publishing house and bookstore near the Sorbonne.

Indeed, books and periodicals by African writers represented Black Americans' most affordable and accessible means of engaging in a transatlantic discourse with the continent in an era prior to the Internet and satellite television. By stocking African texts, black bookstores had a direct hand in facilitating a pan-Africanist literary diaspora in the United States.

In addition to Mulzac, women owned or managed several of the most prominent pan-Africanist bookstores in the United States. From 1968 to 1973, Judy Richardson, Jennifer Lawson, and Daphne Muse were among the veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that operated [Drum and Spear Bookstore](#) in Washington, D.C., one of the best known and largest Black-owned bookstores of the Black Power era. In Los Angeles, bibliophile and librarian [Mayme Clayton](#) established the Third World Ethnic Bookstore in 1973. The store's inventory later became the core of the Western States Black Research Center and, since 2006, the [Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum](#) in Culver City.

These women were many things: radicals, booksellers, intellectuals, and community leaders. Yet they were certainly not conventional business owners. Rather, they were activist entrepreneurs who sought to promote pan-Africanism and Black nationalism through storefronts that doubled as incubators of resistance and solidarity. Indeed, African American women's critical role in the operation of Black bookstores in the 1960s and '70s offers us an illuminating, if largely forgotten, window into grassroots pan-Africanism in the Black Power era.

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1. “Re: Una Godfrey Mulzac,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 13, 1963, “Una Mulzac—Case 100-HQ-400520,” section 1, 181; Hugh Mulzac, *A Star to Steer By* (New York: International Publishers, 1963); “Personality of the Week: Woman Among the Books,” *Mirror* (Georgetown, Guyana), May 28, 1967, 17; Herb Boyd, “Books are in Her Blood,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 26, 2002, 28.
2. “Harlem’s New Liberation Bookstore,” *Challenge: The Revolutionary Communist Paper*, October 1967, 5.
3. Federal Bureau of Investigation memoranda, “Progressive Labor Party,” March 17, 1969, 1-8, National Archives and Records Administration FOIA request RD 40338, part II, 55-62 and “Una Mulzac—Case 100-HQ-400520,” section 2, 32-81; Colin Anthony Beckles, “PanAfrican Sites of Resistance: Black Bookstores and the Struggle to Re-Present Black Identity,” Ph. D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1995, 204-207.
4. Carolyn A. Butts, “Black Community Viewing Books as Tools of Liberation,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 23, 1991, 4.