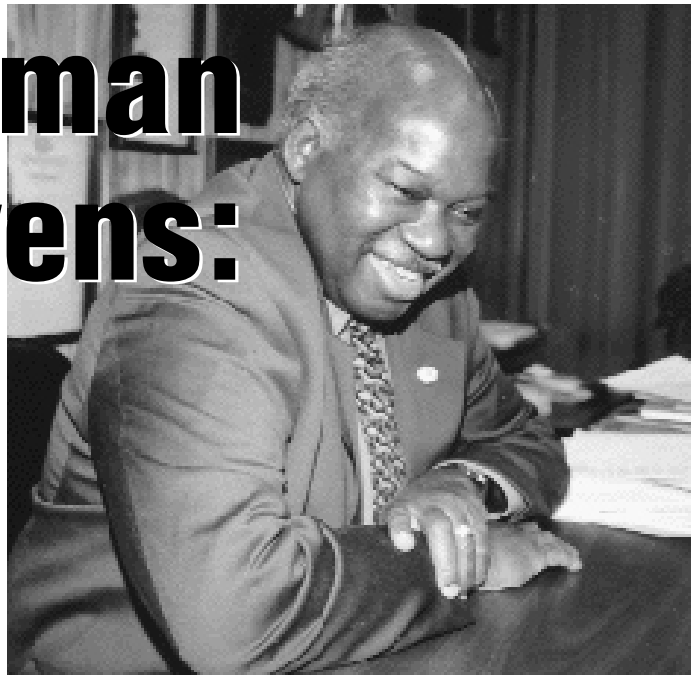
Congressman Major R. Owens:

Literature from Shakespeare to Rap

by Alice Bernstein



Congressman Major R. Owens. Photo by David Bernstein.

I was excited to learn from Lyn Miller-Lachmann, editor-in-chief of *MultiCultural Review,* that Representative Major R. Owens is the only member of Congress who is a librarian. Mr. Owens has served New York's Eleventh Congressional District (Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) in the House of Representatives since 1982. He an outspoken critic of budget cuts for domestic social service programs and works passionately in behalf of children and public education. A member of the Education and Workforce Committee, as well as chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus Education Task Force, he sees education as "the great civil rights battle of today." I was impressed by the fact that a voice so active in the community should belong to someone with a background in literature.

I was impressed by the fact that a voice so active in the community should belong to someone with a background in literature.

With the hope of interviewing him, I sent him articles that have my journalistic approach, based on my study of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the great American poet and critic Eli Siegel. Siegel stated this principle: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

The congressman kindly agreed to an interview, which took place in his Brooklyn office some months before the November 2004 elections. I was affected to see that a powerful fighter on behalf of economic, racial, and social justice was not only deeply thoughtful but soft-spoken and modest as well.

Memphis, Atlanta, New York

I asked the congressman what books he cared for as a child and learned that growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, he had very little access to books.

Major R. Owens: In the house we had old magazines that were given to my father. I was a good student and read textbooks. I liked *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London—I was inspired by that. But I didn't have a whole lot of exposure to books until I got to college. Our libraries were very poor, and nonexistent in elementary school.

Alice Bernstein: *Could you mention who or what most influenced your wanting to be a librarian?*

MRO: It was a very practical decision, because I really wanted to be a writer, and still want to be a writer. I have a novel in the attic and a couple of plays, too. My family wanted me to be a doctor, and I looked at that possibility but decided to be an engineer. I went to Morehouse College and majored in math. By the end of my sophomore year I started taking courses in creative writing, and my interest in writing got inflamed again. I got my degree in 1956 as a major in math and minor in education.

In the meantime, right next to Morehouse, Atlanta University was offering fellowships in its School of Library Science. They stressed the fact that at that time you could get a job anywhere in the country, and I always wanted to get to New York. I became a librarian in order to be able to eat while working on my creative endeavors. It was an ideal match.

AB: *I understand you were a librarian from 1958 to 1966 and worked at Grand Army Plaza. I was probably one of the people you assisted—I'm a Brooklyn girl and loved going to the main library.*

MRO: Yes, I was a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library for eight years, two of them at Grand Army Plaza. I worked in Language and Literature, and at one point I was in charge of the Pay Collection.

AB: *Who are some of your favorite authors now?*

MRO: I am very impressed by political writers and political nonfiction in the last few years. Al Franken's books, for instance, are humorous and very sharp in terms of politics. Then there's the Columbine story and John Dean's book, *Worse Than Watergate*. It's fascinating, and so is the Wesley Clark book on the bestseller list. So I end up reading ancillary stuff to politics.

In college, of course, I read classics, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And I fell in love with Shakespeare. My son is an actor and he further generates my interest in Shakespeare. I managed to write plays as well as writing a novel.

AB: *Eli Siegel writes about the beauty and importance of books in* Children's Guide to Parents and Other Matters*: "Every time you read a book, someone else's feelings meet yours, and mix with yours. You are always being affected by other people's feelings; but books are the big way of bringing to a person the feelings he might never have otherwise."*

This has everything to do with our conversation. Would you like to say what your plays are about?

MRO: The first one I wrote is in the mode of Shakespeare, except it has a "Slave Chorus," in Rap poetry. Otherwise it's very much Shakespearean, with Thomas Jefferson being the tragic hero. *Thomas and Sally*, it's called. It's a story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. It's a great love story. A lot of my colleagues say it's outrageous, how could it be a love story if she was a slave and he had command over her? But it was a forty-year relationship and it was *not* a master-slave relationship.

What interested me most was the conflict within Thomas Jefferson. He said different things at different times about slavery, some of which were outrageous, but at other times he talked about how horrible it was. I think there was an ongoing conflict, which was intensified by his relationship with Sally Hemings. The minds and emotions of the slaves are woven into this drama, primarily through the "Slave Chorus." I depict Jefferson as a tragic hero, a man very much torn apart by conflicts. The play is about the survival and triumph of two great spirits, one slave and one master, over man's most devastating crime. It is a love story that overwhelmingly confirms the common bonds between whites and blacks, and heralds an inevitable freedom for the American slaves and their masters.

At the time I started the play, I had a big fascination with Jefferson, which began with my reading the book *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. I started collecting books on Jefferson and getting the chronology. Writing this play is really something I'm quite proud of. But a couple of people who've looked at it, including my son, said it's too ambitious, so I'm revising it.

Education, Legislation, and Rap

As our interview continued, I asked Congressman Owens about the relationship between being a librarian and a congressman.

MRO: As a librarian, you've got to know a little bit about a whole lot and be able to assemble disparate facts. Being an elected official—I was in the State Senate before Congress—it's the same challenge: You've got to know a little bit about a whole lot and weave it all together.

AB: *What are some of the things you're most proud of doing as a congressman?*

MRO: The proudest thing I would cite is my steadfast inter-

Congressman Owens has given rhythmic expression to his views on many issues before the legislature, including the upheaval in Haiti, his passionate opposition to war, reducing drug prices for senior citizens, and more, for which the Americans for Democratic Action rated his 2003 voting record a perfect 100.

For example, in opposition to proposed cuts in Head Start and other health and education programs, he wrote "The Nation Needs Your Lunch," which begins:

Kids of America
There is a fiscal crunch.
This great nation
Now needs your lunch
To set the budget right.

In "Make Culture Not War," he writes:

The greatest generation
Still waits to take the stage;
Against pain and greed
Wage a new breed of rage. . ..
Be loud about your love,
Put passion in your dove;
The greatest general
Takes orders only from above.
Make Culture Not War!

est in education and remaining on the committee. What I found is that the Education Committee of Congress is very unpopular.

AB: *Why is that?*

MRO: It's unpopular because it's not a money committee. You don't make contacts with people who have money. Children don't have money; teachers don't. If you're going to raise money for your campaigns you go into Commerce or Ways and Means. That's unfortunate. In New York State we have only two people on the Education Committee, but if you're going to be a watchdog on the problems that matter most to children, then that's the place you need to be.

I've been fortunate that, for the brief period that I served as chairman of the subcommittee on selected education, I was able to get a number of bills passed. I played a major role in the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was a landmark piece of legislation, and I'm proud of the fact that I had to do with that.

The Office of Educational Research, OER, for education improvement, is a research arm of the Department of Education that I helped to establish. I also conducted a reorganization study, and most of the items in the study we got passed. I'm very proud of that. Subsequent administrations, like the present one, wiped it out. But the law still exists.

AB: *You showed vividly that reading about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings—who lived 200 years ago—made for powerful feelings that, as Siegel stated, you couldn't have had any other way. What would you like to say to encourage children to love reading?*

MRO: I would say: Enjoy reading, have it become a habit, even a sport. Everything else you do is going to be impacted by being able to read and what you decide to read. I have three very young grandchildren who love the dinosaur books and the LeapFrog books—and I love reading to them.

AB: *What would you recommend to young people that they read?*

MRO: Young people need a grasp of what the world is all about. It's very important that we fought for multicultural programs in the schools, to start from [the students'] own heritage. We just haven't been able to make that point strongly enough in the public schools. When a child starts from his own heritage, his sense of self-worth is bolstered and that helps with everything else. And so it's very important that we create opportunities for them to learn more about their own heritage, regardless of who they are—and beyond that, the heritage of the world. It's important that they not stop, if they are African-American, with just African history or concerns. Greece and Rome played a major role in our lives too. One of my favorite books was Edith Hamilton's *The Greek Way*. That's a magnificent book. And don't dismiss Shakespeare as being antiquated; there's a tremendous combination of philosophy and emotion that you get out of Shakespeare that you can't get anywhere else. It's revered and it's a powerful experience wrapped up in a drama that makes you remember the lessons of history.

AB: *I would like to add that in the past three years you have secured $800,000 in federal funds for the Brooklyn Public Library's programs, including one that will help teens in 20 branches by providing internship opportunities and mentoring in public service agencies.*

What would you most like people to know about you?

MRO: That I think I'm an introvert. I have no apologies for being an introvert, a dreamer, fascinated by challenging literary projects, but also fascinated by political and community action projects. I have been able to expand my own personality, habits, and talents in the political arena, so that I can be as much of an extrovert as anybody else when it's necessary.

I'm proud of the fact that I've mastered those techniques. And I don't apologize for being introspective. In fact, one of the things that delights me most is writing Rap poems, which have become extensions of my remarks from the floor of the House. A Rap poem is a style I like—a mischievous way of doing my public duty and at the same time enjoying it from the point of view of a writer.

The Congressman Asks a Question

Since Congressman Owens was so generous in answering my questions, I asked if there was anything he would like to ask me. "How long have you been studying Aesthetic Realism?" he asked. I told him I was born in Crown Heights Hospital—one of his earliest constituents. I came to know of this education early through my parents. As a student at Brooklyn College, I also began attending lectures given by Eli Siegel on poetry and all arts and sciences, and came to see Aesthetic Realism as the most beautiful, scientific education one could ever have.

My husband, photographer David Bernstein, had accompanied me on this interview, and I mentioned that we both study now in professional classes taught by Class Chairman Ellen Reiss at the not-for-profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City. "I've been married to this gentleman for 42 years," I said. "We've been through many things, as most people have—including life and death matters. What we've learned is a means of our being deeper about the world, other people, and each other."

AB: *I can give an example.*

MRO: Please do.

AB: *I'll say something about anger. We learned from Aesthetic Realism that you either use your anger on behalf of justice to the world and other people or on behalf of selfishness.*

MRO: I like that.

AB: *It's a beautiful, new idea. Along with reading about "Books" in* Children's Guide to Parents, *we've read from Eli Siegel's essay "Being Angry" to youngsters in various cities. Children are excited to hear that there are two kinds of anger and are eager to talk about it. To show the difference, David talked about Martin Luther King having an anger against poverty, cruelty, and injustice. That was a beautiful anger because it made people's lives stronger. It's completely different from an anger where we hurt people just to have our way. In speaking with African-American children in Maryland, I was affected that when I mentioned Nelson Mandela, they didn't know who he was. So I told them how he bravely fought against apartheid and brutality in South Africa and inspired people all over the world. I told the children that I'm grateful to Mr. Siegel for teaching how prejudice can really change, including in me, and that I regret that people whose skin looked like mine were so cruelly unjust to people whose skin looked like theirs. It did my life good to say it, and the children liked hearing it.*

MRO: Wow, that's something! Congratulations. I'm glad you asked me questions, and I'm glad I asked you the questions I did.

Alice Bernstein *is a journalist and Aesthetic Realism Associate, whose articles and regular column "Alice Bernstein & Friends" appear nationwide; many are in the new book* Aesthetic Realism and the Answer to Racism *(www.OrangeAnglePress.com). To learn more, visit the web site of the not-for-profit educational foundation: www.AestheticRealism.org.*

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