Meeting the Minds: Convening Consciousness and Culture at Eso Won Books

by

Lynell George
www.lynellgeorge.com
Staff Reporter, *Los Angeles Times*; Staff Reporter, *Los Angeles Weekly*; KCET *Departures*;
Assistant Professor, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California

Eso Won Books co-proprietors, Tom Hamilton and James Fugate in front of their historic bookstore in Los Angeles, California.

Like a good book, a good bookstore's lifeblood is its stories -- stacks and stacks of them. Stitch together those stray, day-to-day anecdotes with a clever plot, vivid recurring characters and some unexpected twists, and you just might have something solid, something with real longevity.

As the tale of brick-and-mortar retail goes, Eso Won Books' ongoing story is about as twisty as a plot can get. In its 25 years in the trade, despite a wildly inclement business climate rocked by urban unrest, earthquakes, industry shifts, multiple re-locations and recessions, the Southwest Los Angeles bookstore remains a community hub in the heart of Leimert Park. While its long roster of visiting authors: Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, Octavia Butler, and Walter Mosley among them, offers a snapshot and time capsule of African American letters, it isn't only marquee names that hold great import to the bookselling life. As any bookseller would attest, there is an encyclopedia of other crucial factors at play that make a shop not just a "stop," but an essential destination.

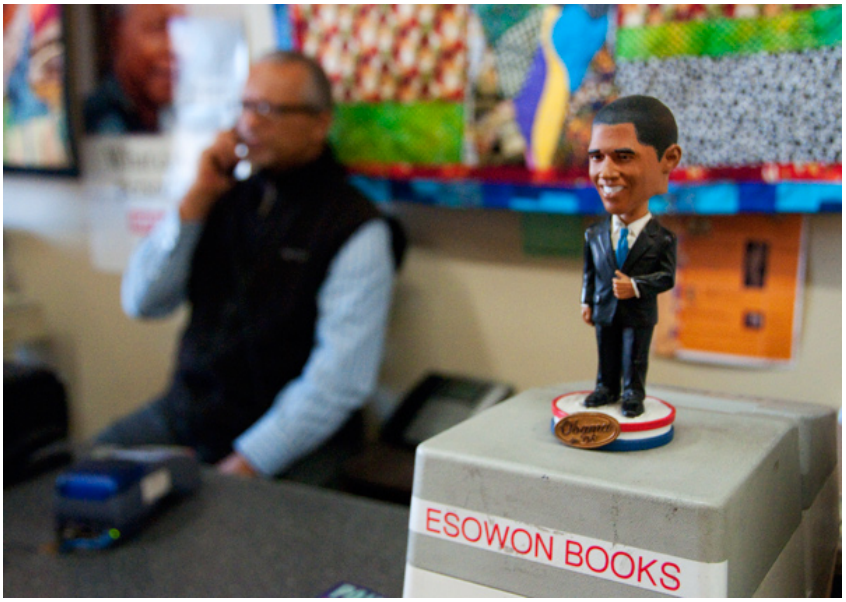
If they're moved to, Eso Won's co-proprietors, James Fugate and Tom Hamilton, might run down a list of the shifting series of players who find their way inside the store on any given day: the regulars who wander in to talk politics; the neighbors who pop by perhaps to get the 411 on the Metro project to be built just down the boulevard. There too are local merchants who may race in to make quick change, or even the intermittent drifter who might peek inside the doorway looking to borrow a spoon. Many, they both know, are just in the habit of ducking in to eavesdrop on a spiky on-going conversation, one that can often ricochet from African folklore to international film to breaking news. And too, there's a loyal, core stream of customers who still stop by to discuss, order and buy books -- for which both Fugate and Hamilton are deeply grateful.

In an ever-shifting bookselling landscape, creative survival has been crucial to Eso Won's longevity; much of that has come from providing a range of titles, along with a deep knowledge in both the stock itself and their customers' range of interests. The idea though isn't just to ring up a sale and pass back the change; it is to engage and cultivate relationships. And while people far and wide know that both men speak their minds and don't suffer fools, Hamilton and Fugate see their role simply and clearly. "People need a place to come," says Hamilton, "one that feels like their own."

Wandering into Eso Won, in the middle of a quiet block on Degnan Avenue, in the middle of a quiet afternoon, often feels like entering a story midway. This overcast winter's afternoon (March 2014) is no different: Both Hamilton and Fugate trade off behind the counter -- handselling, as it's called in the trade -- talking about books they've read, connecting a customer to something new. Both are avid readers -- the deep diving sort -- with their varying passions and expertise. "You have to be," says Hamilton, finishing up a transaction of special-order titles, "to do this right, you have to read books and talk about the books."

Scattered around the store, browsers hover over stacks of sale books -- jazz, history, fine art, African Studies, biographies, general interest titles that peaked high on newspaper bestseller lists. A man in the corner thumbs through recent arrivals, chanting the name "Keith Sweat" over and over under his breath. Another customer inquiries about a book she's special ordered, but instead of just paying and moving on to the next errand, she pulls up a chair to listen in to the conversation.

Over tucked-away speakers bebop soars, and floating against the wall behind the front counter hangs a brilliantly-hued quilt featuring jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding, handmade by a local artist Ramsess. Next to the register a smiling President Obama bobble head vigorously nods with the cash drawer's vibration, as if he's offering his own personal "thank you for your business."



President Obama held a signing at Eso Won in 1995 for his memoir, *Dreams of My Father*. In 2006, the then Senator of Illinois was on another book tour, this time for *The Audacity of Hope*. According to James Fugate, during his time in Los Angeles, he specifically requested to sign books at Eso Won. Photo by Alvaro Parra.

Leapfrogging from location to location around Southwest Los Angeles as their business grew, Eso Won has amassed its own trove of stories -- both celebratory and controversial. "People know about us from the newspapers," says Fugate, meaning both for the big names they've landed for such a small neighborhood venue -- President Bill Clinton, Berry Gordy, Muhammad Ali and the late Johnnie Cochran among them -- but as well as for their share of public tangles. A 1996 business dispute gathered some momentum in the local news when Fugate and Hamilton, after signing a lease, lost a slot in Ladera Heights' Ladera Center when it was sold to a partnership that included Magic Johnson. When word floated that the group was looking to bring in a large chain bookstore instead, this David went after Goliath and found its power in the press (however, the mega-chain rumor never came to fruition).

Then too there's a still-talked about 2002 dust-up that grew out of newspaper literary flap: the late Los Angeles poet Wanda Coleman was sent word that she was "not welcome" to take part in a group reading event at the bookstore after a negative review she'd written about a collection of Maya Angelou's poems appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. Word of Eso Won's decision didn't just make the local rounds, but circled the globe. People took sides. Opinions were polarized. The proprietors held their ground: "We just felt it was a personal attack," Fugate reflects. "And," adds Hamilton, "we felt strongly: there are consequences." Keep thumbing through, there are other chapters: counter-narratives, flipsides.

For many authors who routinely stop in to lecture, read, or sign, Eso Won's draw is both its personal touch and the powerful symbolism the shop represents: an independent Black-owned bookstore dedicated, but not exclusive, to the stories of people of the African diaspora. Its role within and connection to the community's pulse is one of its fundamental draws.

Case in point: you'd be hard pressed to find another spot in Los Angeles where a standard book signing might feature Wynton Marsalis toting his trumpet, and a customer, on a whim, bringing by a pot of gumbo to help the hours-long line of customers pass the time. Or an indelible afternoon with Muhammad Ali who, as Fugate recalls, was also in it for the long haul. "He sat here, from one to six, and said, 'I'm going to sign every book.' There were about 300 of them. And he did."

This loyalty, both Hamilton and Fugate have come to know, isn't empty symbolism; the emotional associations also run deep. Writer Walter Mosley, born in Los Angeles but East Coast-based, routinely carves out time to appear at the store. Not for the crowds, which can be quite large, but for sentimental reasons. "He said it was the last place that his father saw him read," says Fugate. In Mosley's estimation, Eso Won is not simply a business but a building block of a deep memory. This is a significant detail, a key to understanding the psyche of the city and its dwellers. Angelenos often talk about how swiftly and radically the city physically changes -- through out-migration, re-development or gentrification -- but what's not often voiced, expansively and with nuance, is what happens to a sense of community when there is a dramatic shift in demographics. Particularly for African-American Angelenos (whose population county-wide, according to 2012 census stats, dipped below 10%) the concept of community has become a much more diffused notion. Having a physical gathering spot that feels like home felt like a rare, if not vanishing, possibility.

Providing just that sort of community touchstone was the impetus behind Eso Won. Back in the late '80s Fugate, who had been managing a college bookstore in Detroit, decided to make a leap and move west to work at the company's Compton College outlet. Not long after, a curious Hamilton happened to wander in. "I was looking specifically for some books by Dr. Ben -- Yosef A. A. ben-Jochannan -- "*Black Man of the Nile and His Family*," Hamilton recalls, "and also books by J. A. Rogers. Some people told me that they had them up there." That afternoon while Hamilton was perusing the stacks, his backpack slung across his shoulders, one of the clerks alerted Fugate. "He said, 'There's a brother in the black book section with a backpack,'" Fugate remembers. "I walked by, took a look and said, 'You don't have to worry about that guy at all. He's one of us. He's sitting up there smiling at the books. He's just as nuts as we are.'"

After a while Fugate and Hamilton got talking about books, but also, more importantly, about ideas. Fugate had been carting the campus store's books out to events around Greater Los Angeles and gathering attention for all the difficult-to-find titles he was selling -- titles few local bookstores (with the exception of the venerable Aquarian Books, Los Angeles then-longstanding, destination black bookstore) might carry.

But it was more than a full time job -- five days of the week in the store, plus weekends selling for no overtime pay. As it turned out, Hamilton and a friend, Asoma Nkwanta, had been piecing out a plan to open a bookstore, and so they invited Fugate in for consult -- a meeting that, over time, evolved into the sketches of a plan for the three to partner.

Co-proprietors Tom Hamilton and James Fugate in front of two tapestries by Leimert Park artist Ramsess. Photo by Alvaro Parra.

In October 1988, they collectively began implementing the plan in stages. First selling at festivals or events on weekends, building a reputation; after that the venture began to take on a life of its own. "We had so many books, we couldn't even get to them," says Hamilton. "We were forever going into crates, trying to find things people were looking for. We needed a place. We wanted stacks for books. We needed shelves to put them on."

They decided to make the next leap. "We were throwing possible names around -- put three in the hat," Fugate recalls. They wanted a name that reflected their mission. The slip they pulled from the hat read "Eso Won." As Hamilton remembers it, it was a place that his friend Nkwana had traveled to, a place along the Nile. "He was struck by its quiet. Its peacefulness. Almost like a library." It seemed fitting.

Locating a small storefront on Slauson near Plymouth in Inglewood, California, they signed a lease, began unpacking their crates, and prepared for business. All three kept their full-time jobs but traded off covering late afternoon, post-day-job shifts and weekends. But, as Fugate remembers it, "It became obvious pretty soon, from the demand," that it was time to just jump in -- all the way.

Putting themselves on the map -- literally -- was key to fixing them in customers' consciousness. It was crucial to have a spot where patrons could stop by in a pinch or on a whim. The range of titles and depth of the stock were important, but even more so was the message that there was a place to go to find books that didn't just entertain, but helped to engage and educate and perhaps -- most crucially -- contextualize. For patrons, the side-benefit of four walls and a roof symbolized a safe haven, a place where discussion and debate could flow freely in the aisles, not just after a provocative in-store reading but even following the big headline news of the day. "One guy," says Hamilton, "came up to me recently and said that we we're like a barber shop. Except we don't cut hair."

Photo: Departures Youth Voices

The little village of shops on Degnan Boulevard in the Leimert Park area of Los Angeles had long been on their radar -- in fact, says Fugate, since the very beginning. Back in the late '80s the block was alive with art galleries, jazz and late-night cafes, and organic meeting spots where Los Angeles black art and intellectual life was in full bloom; it seemed a perfect fit for a Black bookstore. But the timing was off. Early on, they lost out on one spot. Later, there weren't any properties available that had the space they might need for their growing stock. That would change after their rent spiked at their third location on La Brea near Coliseum -- Fugate and Hamilton looped back to Leimert Park and took over the storefront that used to house Brian Breye's curio-rich, Museum in Black (two years ago, they once again relocated, to a storefront a few feet down the block.)

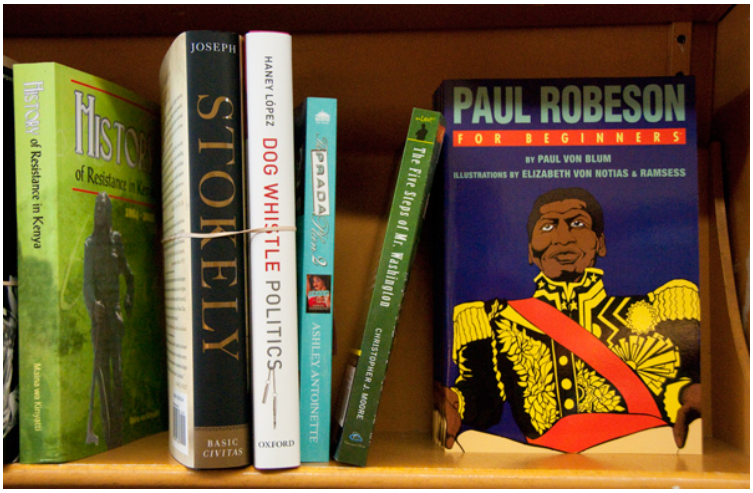
But after 1992's civil unrest Leimert Park Village took a nasty hit economically, and that lively, easy vibe was difficult to sustain. To be sure, there are long-standing businesses with loyal followings dotted along the avenue -- Gallery Plus and Sika among them. And while there have been some neighborhood cultural or performance stalwarts, like Ben Caldwell at KAOS Network, the Fernando Pullum Community Art Center, or the struggling but still present World Stage, Leimert Park has had trouble regaining that momentum and seemed to be receding deeply into a shadow of a dream.

The move to Leimert in 2006 has been tough on Eso Won as a business for a complex set of reasons. "While you get folks who make it a point to stop in when they are travelling from New York or Atlanta, you also have some [local] customers who won't make that trip with you -- even if it is just a few miles away," says Hamilton. Also Fugate explains, the surrounding businesses are not all in sync in terms of dedicated operating days and hours, so there isn't always a regular flow of customer traffic coming through. "When we were back on La Brea we got a lot of walk in traffic and other businesses were at least open until 8 p.m." The quiet street and intermittent hours, in terms of customer expectation and retention, all takes its toll on the till.

Of course, the publishing landscape has also dramatically re-made itself since the late '80s. "Publishers have stopped sending people on tour as regularly. And Bebe [Moore Campbell] and E. Lynn [Harris] dying, both who had huge followings, had an effect. These were authors who did really well here in the store," says Fugate. "And an author like Eric Jerome Dickey, who has 10 or 15 books, doesn't need to tour necessarily." Each shift, small and large, they both agree, has to be factored in, with a subtraction or concession made.

Despite it, they still bring in solid crowds with a full event calendar. A recent appearance by professor Gerald Horne packed in more than 100 people, and *Atlantic* magazine senior editor and columnist, Ta-Nehisi Coates, via his blog and other social media, brought in a lively book-buying crowd. Both are guardedly hopeful about the recent signs of regeneration blooming both along Degnan and Leimert Boulevard. Not long ago singer Barbara Morrison began booking acts at her Performing Arts Center, and even more recently, a new contemporary fine art gallery, Papillion, opened up across the way on Degnan. Just a stone's throw away, on Leimert Boulevard, long-time tenant, artist Mark Bradford, has been at work re-interpreting a necklace of quaint storefronts into an arts complex.

Hamilton and Fugate are considering the possibilities about what the addition to Metro, a new light-rail transportation system might do -- who it could bring and what it might mean for a re-interpretation of this block, how this little stretch of businesses might change, for better or worse. But that doesn't mean altering their master plan. If anything, in all this time unpacking, shelving and selling books, they've learned whatever's tucked around the corner is just another plot twist; another turn of the page. In uncertain waters, as in uncertain times, people are looking for a point-of-reference, some metaphorical anchor: "People need something familiar, sometimes they need a place to come," echoes Hamilton. "People need to know and feel, no matter what, 'This is still our store.'"



Lynell George is a Los Angeles, California based journalist and essayist. She has had a long career in Los Angeles newspapers as staff writer for both the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Weekly* where she focused on social issues, human behavior and identity politics as well as visual arts, music and literature. She has taught journalism at Loyola Marymount University and is also a Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities Fellow at the University of Southern California, and a University of Southern California Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Fellow (2013). Her work has appeared in various essay collections and in news outlets including *Boom: A Journal of California*, *Slake*, *The Smithsonian*, *Good Reads*, *Vibe*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Essence*, *Black Clock*, *The Root* and *Ms*. She is also the author of *No Crystal Stair: African Americans in the City of Angels* (1994), a collection of features and essays, and a graduate of Loyola Marymount University.