EMPOWERMENT FROM THE MARGINS: AN IMPLICATION FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS FOUND IN AN EXPLORATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVE NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Between 1936 and 1938 narratives from former slaves were collected during the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writer's Project. Over 200 of those narratives were collected in South Carolina. In the 1800's the Georgetown district thrived as the principal rice-growing area in the United States. Over forty-six million pounds of rice were produced in Georgetown County. An interpretive analysis of narratives from twelve former slaves were collected in Georgetown County and neighboring areas. The former slaves self-affirmation as a knowledgeable people and their pride and connection to the land they worked were emerging themes. The researcher believes that these themes demonstrate empowerment from a marginalized people, and provide major implication for today's marginalized students. Today's marginalized students are self-affirming and making connections to what they believe is important. As educators, we must facilitate and provide opportunities for those affirmations and connections to be nurtured to support marginalized students becoming contributing citizens.

Keywords: slavery, narratives, empowerment, marginalized, students

1. SLAVE NARRATIVES

Between 1936 and 1938 field workers for the Federal Writer's Project collected the stories of former slaves. The Federal Writer's Project was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided jobs to the unemployed during the Great Depression. Over twenty-three hundred former slaves were interviewed. Federal field workers were given instructions on the kinds of questions to ask and how to capture and record dialects. These interviews were transcribed and form much of the base of primary documents upon which historians have based their understanding of the institution of slavery in the Southern states (Horton, 2002). Although the slave narratives are considered primary documents, there have been several concerns regarding the validity of these narratives (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division). There had been more than seventy years between emancipation and the time of the interviews. The informants were old and most were living in poverty. These factors often made the informants see the past more pleasant than it actually was (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division). Because of this there is a question of the informants reporting their experiences accurately.

In addition, most of the interviewers were amateurs and were inexperienced in the use of interview techniques (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division). Also, there was a chance that the interviewer's race, predominately Caucasian, affected an informant's response (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division), although there were African-American intellectuals, such as Zora Neale Hurston, who were interviewers, there were very few. Lastly, it is impossible to determine the processes by which the informants were selected. Accounts found in the collection were overwhelmingly from urban residents even though there was a higher percentage of African-Americans over eighty-five living in rural areas in 1930's (Library of Congress Manuscript Division). It is important to note the concerns of the slave narratives. Race, age and perception are significant factors that could have affected their validity. However, the slave narratives provide a voice from the most extreme margin of humanity in the history of the United States. Regardless of the potential limiting factors, to understand the humanity of those marginalized, we must explore the narratives of those who were once slaves.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE – LIFESTYLE OF A SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVE

Slaves in Georgetown were imported into the district as early as 1720 (Rogers, 1970). By 1810 they were eighty-eight percent of the total population (Rogers, 1970). Rice was the crop of Georgetown, and with a strong slave labor force many plantation owners became wealthy. Slaves were allowed a midday meal that usually consisted of foods such as rice, corn, peas, potatoes, salted fish, pork, and bacon.

Archaeological records show that slaves often cooked for themselves (Fountain, 1995). Archaeologists have consistently found charred domestic and wild-animal remains from slave sites of all regions (Fountain, 1995). Sunday was a day of rest, and on weekends slaves could get passes or tickets to leave the plantation and visit friends on other plantations (Rogers, 1970; Joyner, 1984). Tickets were given as rewards of good behavior. Joyner (1984) believed that such visiting patterns gave strength to the slave community. In the Friendfield slave community, which was part of the Friendfield Plantation, one of the eleven plantations of Hobcaw Barony of Georgetown County, Brockington (2006) shared that as many as twenty (20) cabins of the slaves may have stood in 1840 in the village. All of the houses were symmetrical and ordered. Fountain (1995) explained that the design and building techniques created in the slave quarters are among the most recognizable African influences on the lives of slaves. Owens (1976) considered life in the quarters of slaves a retreat from the prying eyes of overseers and masters. Slaves in the quarters had varying skills and talent. With those talents they learned the advantages of pooling resources such as hunting, fishing and trading favors (Owens, 1976). Whether slaves lived on small farms or plantations, they were allowed to cultivate garden plots (Boles, 1984). Boles (1984) added that slaves tended their own crops either at the twilight end of the day or during "time-off". Having a distinctive culture helped slaves develop a sense of solidarity (Blassingame, 1979; Joyner, 1984).

Throughout the south there were two methods employed to manage slaves: the "gang system" and the "task system" (Stamp, 1956). Overseers supervised both methods. Basset (1925) believed that the role of the overseer was the center of the southern system. Under the gang system, field hands were divided into gangs and the drivers worked them at an intense pace (Stamp, 1956). Under the task system slaves were assigned specific jobs. Because of the task system of labor, a limited slave economy existed and slaves were able to raise their own provisions (Kolchin, 1983). Brockington (2006) added that "off time" the enslaved might garden, trap, fish, quilt, and care for personal livestock. Skilled craftsmen were considered the highest rank among the slaves. Similar to Owens point, Brockington (2006) shared that on at least three Hobcaw plantations there is evidence of mechanics, wheelwrights, millers, bricklayers and other various skills. Joyner (1984) explained that West Africa was a land of craftsmen, and enslaved Africans brought technologies such as metalwork, woodwork, and pottery.

Field labor on the Georgetown plantations and neighboring areas used the task system. Each slave had an appointed task according to his/her age and ability (Rogers, 1970; Carney, 1996, Brockington, 2006). The slave could set his/her own pace and quit when task was done (Stamp, 1956). The task system adapted well to the rice plantations because the fields were divided into small segments of drainage ditches (Stamp, 1956). Often slaves would work at least nine (9) to ten (10) hours a day depending on the season. During the fall slaves spent time ditching, embanking, and repairing the trunks. Because of the geographical location of Georgetown, planters had to learn how to produce rice in a saltwater freshwater environment. The process of ditching, embanking, and repairing were significant steps in making this tidal culture effective. Carney (1996) pointed out that in the last twenty years evidence has been gathered to show how African-born slaves provided crucial expertise in the rice cultivation system that developed in South Carolina. Planters preferred slaves from Angola, the Gambia River area, the Windward Coast and the Gold Coast (Boyle, 1996, Brockington, 2006). In the 18th century, forty-three (43) percent of the Africans brought to South Carolina were from rice regions (Brockington, 2006).

The ebb and flow of the tide were used to drain and flood fields, so rice planting was confined to fresh water that had already been affected by tidal action (Rogers, 1970). The floods were gauged by determining the high and low spots created in the trunks. During the winter the land was turned by plow and hoe. Harrowing would take place in March. The trenches were about a foot apart. The seed was wetted in clay and water, so it would not float to the surface during sprout flow, and then dried. After the sprout flow, water was taken off so the sun could affect the growth of about six (6) inches. Harvest began in early September (Rogers, 1970). The completion of a cycle of rice cultivation led to grueling work routines related to milling. Carney (1996) explained that there are three main operations involved in rice milling: threshing, winnowing, and pounding.

In order to execute the threshing the slaves would separate the grains from the stalks after drying. Threshing was done with either a flailing stick, having an animal trample the grains, or machinery (Carney, 1996). Winnowing (alternates with pounding) removes the empty husks and chaff. Slaves would place the rice in a flat basket and rotate the grains so that the lighter materials move to the edge (Carney, 1996). The third operation is a two-step process called pounding. First, the slaves would remove the grain's hard outer coat or hull, and secondly polish the rice by separating the bran and the nutrient-bearing germ from the softer endosperm (Carney, 1996).

3. METHODOLOGY

I am a teacher educator and a critical theorist. I believe that dominant groups in the United States have exercised their power and politics to tell the stories of non-dominant groups while having access to a much larger audience. I consider the period during slavery as one of the most extreme demonstrations of marginalization in the United States because slaves were considered to be unequal and unequivocally ostracized from the mainstream community. Can marginalized people be empowered people?

Freire stated, "And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility" (p.43, 1970). He continued, "But, while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation" (p.43, 1970).

As the researcher I approached this study with a critical lens in order to explore empowerment from marginalized people and capture the essence of former slaves humanization, what Freire would call the people's vocation. "It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity" (Freire, p.44, 1970). Yearning for freedom, recovering a lost humanity, and a sense of self-worth and valued all speak to being an empowered human being.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

Can marginalized people be empowered people? If so, how is that empowerment demonstrated?

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

Welcome Bees	104 years of age
Hagar Brown	Reported 77 years of age (Born before freedom)
Margaret Bryant	Born before 1865
Albert Carolina	87 years of age
Ellen Godfrey	100 years of age
Dolly Haynes	91 years of age
Mariah Heywood	Born in 1855
Ben Horry	87 years of age
Gabe Lance	77 years of age
William Oliver	born before 1865
Sabe Rutledge	born in 1861
Willis Williams	90 years of age

3.3 DATA COLLECTION and ANALYSIS

The researcher located forty eight (48) narratives of twelve (12) former slaves listed under Georgetown County and neighboring areas (Burgess, Murrells Inlet, Conway, Arthurtown, and Waverly Mills) using the *The American Slave*: *A Composite Autobiography* by George Rawick as data for this study. All narratives were examined to identify themes. In order to maintain a better focus the researcher chose themes that would 1. Assist in answering the research question and 2. Have a high chance of reliability considering the relative age of the former slaves as well as circumstances regarding the Federal Writer's Project. Topics related to empowerment were considered for final analysis. Materials were read and the researcher recorded data related to themes. After recording data excerpts related to themes, the researcher recorded new and previous impressions. Following, the researcher reread and coded the data and recorded interpretations. Next, the researcher rechecked the data, interpretations, and impressions in terms of their strengths, concerns, and application of the empowerment of former slaves. A draft and final summary were written identifying excerpts that supported interpretations.

4. SELF-AFFIRMATION AS A KNOWLEDGABLE PEOPLE

Throughout the narratives, questions asked about the land the slaves worked were answered with a great deal of knowledge and ownership. Working the land meant making it respond and having high yield of rice production and other major crops. A relationship between the slaves and the land was formed over the years. The slaves knew what, when, and how to nurture the land to make it respond positively. A major part of the slave's lifestyle was working the land. They knew how to live on it, produce crops on it, and basically survive on it.When asked how much a task was Ben Horry answered, "A quarter (acre) if you mashing ground.

Ten compass digging ground. Cutting rice one half acre a day" (Rawick, 1972, p.302). He was not in denial in knowing how much a task was, even thought that very task was forced upon him by his oppressors. He answered the question with specific details. When Fred Poinsette was asked what was in a bushel bucket he said, "Black dirt; dirt; home dirt; so it'll feel homey, so it'll feel at home" (Rawick, 1977, p.273). Poinsette related what was in a bushel bucket as home dirt. Home is defined as the place where one lives, such as a family member. Poinsette's explanation of what was in the bucket is personal and related to who he is and what he knows so well. The slaves had an intimate relationship with the land, so much that they could create from that intimacy. Ellen Godfrey recalled the song of Tom Taggum being called to remove old bone baggum out of the wiggy waggum, explained by the interviewer as getting a cow out of the cotton fields (Rawick, 1972, p.163). The depth of their knowledge and intimacy allowed a spirited level of creativity that could only be wielded by those who knew the work best. Ellen Godfrey continued when asked how she cooked on a flat, "Dirt bank up; fire make on dirt; bit pot; cook; fry meat; come peedee get off flat; bake, bake, Iron oven (peedee – referring ot the Pee Dee River) (Rawick, 1972, p.155).

Knowing how to navigate the land, kill animals for food, make use of the saltwater as well as freshwater was all familiar knowledge for the slaves. Sabe Rutledge explained about boiling salt, "Boil salt? Pump, pump, had a tank. Run from (h)ill to sea. Had a platform similar to wharf. And pump on platform……. Go out there on platform; force pump. My grandmother boil salt way after freedom; we tote water; tote in pidgin and keeler – made out of cedar and cypress (Rawick, 1972, p.59) (pidgin definition: bucket, Geraty, 1997). Like Rutledge, William Oliver gave an account of his experiences with the land, "We'd eat peas, rice, cornbread, rye bread, sweetbread, most molasses, game was all over the woods. Everybody could hunt everybody land those days. Hunting was free. When I come along had to work too hard to hunt. Could get pike out the lakes. Go fishing Sabbath. That was day off. Sunday free day. Wild turkey. Possum. Don't bother with no coon much. Possum and squirrel all we could get. Had our garden. Different beans and collards" (Rawick, 1972, p.219).

Sabe Rutledge who was present during William Oliver's interview added, "We raise all we get to eat. Hominy, cornbread, peas, potatoes, rice. Morest (mostly) we plant this here yellow corn; when you want beef have to hunt'em like we hunts deer now" (Rawick, 1972, p.65). The former slaves maintained strong memories of their past. When they spoke of the past and answered questions about the land they were forced to work, their words were strong and descriptive. The land was there home. When Welcome Bees said "Plow right now" (interviewer explained as meaning April is time to plow rice fields) (Rawick, 1972 p.49), he was speaking of knowledge that had been passed down from generations.

5. PRIDE AND CONNECTION

There was a great deal of pride among the former slaves for having vast knowledge about preparing the canals for rice growing. Ben Horry shared, "All them rice field been nothing but swamp; slavery people cut kennel (canal) and dig ditch through the raw swamp; all these fields been thick woods; ditching man task wuz ten compass" (Rawick, 1972, p.312). Gabe Lance repeats Horry's sentiment, "all dem rice-field been nothing but swamp. Slavery people cut kennel (canal) and dig ditch and cut down woods; and dig ditch through the raw woods; all been clear up for plant rice by slavery people (Rawick, 1972, p.92). The former slaves had a connection to the land, and it was more than a forced connection created by those who oppressed them, but progress and deceit was often the enemy to those who actually owned land. During the interviews and without provocation former slaves repeatedly spoke of others deceptively trying to take their land after slavery. Maria Heywood exclaimed, "My God tell me to tell (till) the earth! I can't sign 'gainst my land! The lady talk, she tell me I needy. I tell her "yes'm" but I can't sign gainst my land. If I just can hold on to my land! I a burn child, I burn. I'faid" (Rawick, 1977, p.188).

Ben Horry's position is similar, "All them tricky mens try to go and get old Ben's land sign to 'em. That's the mainest (meanest) thing take me to con-o-way (Conway, SC) every week. They all talk so sugar mouth till my name down; Then when my name write is another thing" (Rawick, 1977, p.308 Hagar Brown sings her favorite song at the close of an interview, "Stay in the field! Stay in the field! Stay in the field 'till the war been end!" (Rawick, 1972, p.107). Being interviewed decades since the Civil War, the former slaves of Georgetown county and neighboring areas have a personal reason for staying on the land. They are knowledgeable, personally connected, and proud of the land they were once forced to work.

6. IMPLICATIONS for TODAY'S MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

The slave narratives represent the voice of African-Americans who survived one of the most extreme forms of marginalization in U.S. history. Being marginalized did not hinder their human desire to gain knowledge, as well as acquire a sense of pride and connection to the land they were forced to work. Even though more than 70 years had passed, the former slaves of Georgetown County and neighboring areas demonstrated that living forcibly in the margins deterred empowerment but it did not cease the drive to be empowered. This find is an implication for marginalized students in today's classroom. The implication of these findings is that our marginalized students may look back on their k-12 experience and share a voice that proudly self-validates him/herself as a person of knowledge, and shares a personal connection to a particular content area. Being on the margins of the mainstream only limits opportunities but it does not limit ability, areas of strength, and passion. But, because it limits opportunities the educational process fails to meet its responsibilities as a key factor of how that student might change his/her life for the better.

Furthermore, the findings imply that although the former slaves either were not given opportunities or at least they were not given sustainable opportunities, more than 70 years later they continue to speak with an empowered voice regarding their skills, knowledge, and connection to the land. What were lacking were opportunities to support that empowerment. The responsibility of facilitating the lives of an empowered marginalized people to live a fulfilled life was not present. But, it can be present with today's empowered marginalized students.

Clearly, we should not wait for our empowered marginalized students to graduate and the k-12 experience is over. As educators we must be responsible in the present, and not have to shamefully apologize for our lack of responsibility as we look to the past. If we wait to respond after our marginalized students end their k-12 experience, we become an institutional hindrance to someone who could have become a significant contributor to our society. We must hear our marginalized students' stories, and we must listen for that self-affirmation of knowledge and connection to what is important. We must create opportunities within our curriculum. We must invite their expertise and encourage that they share with the rest of the class. It is our responsibility to facilitate the empowerment of today's marginalized students.

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