

Hidden Education Among African Americans During Slavery

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Background/Context: *Historical studies examine aspects of African American education in and out of school in detail (Woodson 1915, 1933, Bullock 1970, Anderson 1988, Morris 1982, Rachal 1986, Rose 1964, Webber 1978, Williams 2005). Scholars of African American literacy have noted ways that education intersects other arenas such as religion and expressive culture (Cornelius 1991, Gundaker 1998).*

Objective: *Most of the papers in this volume focus on contemporary ethnographic research that explores processes of “education” outside of schooling which are hidden by the dominance of “schooling” and “learning” as paradigms for what education “is.”*

Population: *However, African Americans under enslavement often had to hide educational practices, especially those relating to literacy, under threat of violence. Thus the stakes of education were high indeed with much to teach about the “hidden processes of deliberate change” (Varenne, this volume) that are the subject of this special issue.*

Research Design: *This paper examines three interrelated kinds of activity from a historical anthropological perspective: 1) invisible or seemingly extraneous aspects of schooling and efforts to orchestrate school-like activities; 2) hidden and not so hidden literacy acquisition; and 3) expressive practices with educational dimensions for participants that remained largely invisible to outsiders.*

Conclusions: *“Hidden education” in the Quarter involved a double language that addressed both the world as it “is” and the world as it could or should be; the world that outsiders control and the one that insiders are continually educating each other to make. Thus, it seems the enslaved have contributed a more complex theory of education than that which informs much of today’s schooling. Similarly, they have left a legacy of valuable educative skills that schools today often undervalue.*

The American Negro slave, adopting Brer Rabbit as hero, represented him as the most frightened and helpless of creatures... But his essential characteristic was his ability to get the better of bigger and stronger animals. To the slave in his condition the theme of weakness overcoming strength through cunning proved endlessly fascinating (Bontemps 1958:ix).

We are not going to share modern civilization just by deserving recognition. We are going to force ourselves in by organized far-seeing effort—by outthinking and outflanking the owners of the world today who are too drunk with their own arrogance and power successfully to oppose us, if we think and learn and do (W.E.B. Du Bois quoted in Butchart 1988:333).

OVERVIEW AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Most of the papers in this book focus on ethnographic research in contemporary settings that explores processes of “education” outside of schooling hidden which are from view by the dominance of “schooling” and “learning” as paradigms for what education “is.” Yet it is hard to imagine a situation in which “hidden processes of deliberate change” (Varenne, this volume) would be more likely to occur than among people held against their wills for forced labor throughout their entire lives. Surely such people would use education to craft an alternative destiny for themselves and their children. So it was for Africans and their descendants enslaved in what is now the United States from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries: so-called “informal” education was a very serious matter. Indeed, this has remained the case. As W. E. B. Du Bois famously stated in the quotation above, the “owners of the world” are blinded by their own drunken arrogance from perceiving the thinking and learning and doing that undo their domination.

The regime that made lifelong slavery not only possible, but the primary mode of production and source of income for two-thirds of U.S. Presidents and Supreme Court justices prior to 1861 (Katz 1996: xv), necessitated massive hegemonic structures operating at all levels, from philosophical abstractions claiming the racial and intellectual superiority of whites; through legal controls, work scheduling, and residence patterns; down to micro level policing of interactions between whites and blacks, including comportment, eye contact, speech, reproduction,

clothing, and diet. Thus it is no wonder that some historians have characterized plantation slavery as a “total institution” (Patterson 1982, Elkins 1968).

However, an anthropological approach would hold that, whatever its ideology, no institution that involves living beings can ever be “total” in practice, and concurring with Du Bois, one based on such massive self-interest and self-deception could not be other than filled with leaks generated within its own contradictions and undercut by loop-holes and cave-ins orchestrated by “organized, far-seeing effort.” Thus, while enslavers took their own superiority for granted, they were also so focused on their own class, income, and safety that they tended to take an out-of-sight-out-of-mind attitude toward activities of the enslaved outside these spheres (Abrahams and Szwed 1983). For example, in some time periods and some slaveholding areas such as coastal South Carolina, where absentee plantation ownership and delegated management were commonplace, a certain degree of literacy was regarded as advantageous for key enslaved personnel to keep accounts, order supplies, and communicate by letter with the property owner (Starobin 1974, Miller 1978:139–263).

Many white Southerners also believed that all people should have access to the Christian Bible (Cornelius 1991:12), although this attitude changed as the Bible’s libratory passages resounded through spirituals, sermons, and abolitionist tracts. Notoriously, planters “educated” the enslaved with an edited selection of Bible passages garnered to support capture and involuntary servitude. But critical thinking was certainly well-developed in the Quarter as the following passage from the planter-preacher, Reverend Charles C. Jones’s *Eleventh Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes of Liberty County, Georgia*, (1846) reveals:

Allow me to relate a fact which occurred the spring of this year [1845], illustrating the character and the knowledge of the Negroes at this time. I was preaching to a large congregation on the *Epistle of Philemon*: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of *running away*, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or with his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them: some solemnly declared that there is no such Epistle in the Bible; others, ‘that I preached to please the masters,’ others, that it was not in the Gospel; others ‘that

they did not care if they ever heard me preach again.' I took no notice of the ferment, but went forward as though nothing had happened (Jones 1846:24–25).

This passage not only illustrates protest and knowledge but also that the “hiddenness” of African American education from whites was not absolute. On this occasion, at least, Jones was forced to recognize he was dealing with intelligent well-informed, thoroughly dissatisfied people. He chose simply to proceed in his interactions with the enslaved as if these qualities did not exist; however, he also took them seriously enough to warn other whites of the threat they posed.

Even when whites barred blacks from religious instruction, schooling or literacy, they encouraged dancing, singing and storytelling during the enslaved’s time off, fallaciously assuming that these supposedly childlike people would be not be able to entertain and resist at the same time. They also left much of the care of white children to black caretakers and companions who in turn carefully gathered snippets of schooled knowledge from their charges. In such interstices, the enslaved educated themselves and each other in an environment where the stakes were as high as self-liberation from bondage and the punishments for lapses in “hiddenness” as great as beatings, amputations, even death.

Possibilities and constraints such as these interconnected African Americans despite differences in circumstance; they also linked African Americans with a pool of others who were provisionally recruitable into educative networks: white abolitionists, children, drinkers, drunkards, and missionaries; as well the higher powers of God and the Spirit. Thus, the enslaved, along with free Blacks in the North and the South, constituted a community of practice dedicated not merely to exploiting loopholes but more importantly to furthering transformation personally, locally, and on a massive social scale.

This paper peers into some of the holes where seeds of transformation took root, including some literal ones. Education proliferated underneath and within the stuff of everyday life, like traffic in and out of the root cellars enslaved people dug beneath the hearths and floors of their quarters to secrete everything from ancestral altars to diet supplementing foods to buttons, beads and spelling books (Edwards-Ingram 1998).

Educational activities during slavery were thus more diverse, flexible, and contingent than the rubric “schooling” could ever encompass, even more so because regimes of slavery varied across the Diaspora and within North America. For example, although today slavery is largely associated in school textbooks with the South, the thousands of Africans and African descendants buried in lower Manhattan’s African Burial Ground (Blakey

1998) probably had relatively few opportunities for education in reading and writing or skilled trades during their lifetimes of forced labor, compared with those enslaved in a merchant or furniture maker's household in New York, Charleston, or New Orleans. Varying from plantation to plantation, agricultural slavery also offered a wide range of opportunities for the alert amid stark days of toil.

Given such diversity and the excellent publications that examine aspects of African American education in and out of school in great detail (Woodson 1915, 1933, Bullock 1970, Anderson 1988, Morris 1982, Rachal 1986, Rose 1964, Webber 1978), this paper aims for suggestiveness rather than comprehensiveness. With the aim of suggesting some of the forms African American "hidden" education took during the slavery era in the southern states, it will dig briefly into three interrelated kinds of activity: 1) invisible or seemingly extraneous aspects of schooling and efforts to orchestrate school-like activities; 2) hidden and not so hidden literacy acquisition; and 3) expressive practices with educational dimensions for participants that remained largely invisible to outsiders.

Primary sources for the paper include memoirs, educators' autobiographies, and interviews with formerly enslaved people conducted by the Federal Writers Project (FWP) during the 1930s (Rawick 1972, 1977, 1979). Such accounts are by no means neutral descriptions or approximations of "fieldnotes;" rather, they are tellings that take stock of social conditions, outsider interviewers, and interpersonal responsibilities as well as recount individual experiences (Blassingame 1975, Perdue 1976). Examination of these narratives from the perspective of historical anthropology suggests that the enslaved, perhaps by necessity as well as design, were implicit and explicit educational theorists who reframed the premises of "western" education from the rhetoric of incapacity, deficiency, failed imitation and theft that slaveholders disseminated, to one of success, leadership, self-help, mutual aid and assistance from a Power higher than the slaveholders. Newcomers from west and central Africa also brought resources with them that contributed to these processes. Thus, African Americans made education fit their circumstances—difficult to achieve in most schooling at that time, even for those relatively few who access to it.

HIDDEN EDUCATION AND "SCHOOLS"

Although "schooling" is usually contrasted with "hidden education" in this volume, it is well to remember that establishing schools by and for African Americans during the colonial, ante-, and even postbellum periods was itself a radical arena of struggle with "hidden" aspects that car-

ried over into the most ordinary encounters. For example, schooled persons routinely had to hide their accomplishments or risk abuse, (a trend that persisted through Segregation and into the present). Graduates of the African Free School in New York in the 1820s even suspected the whites who supported the school of purposely designing a curriculum to ensure the students' failure (Swan 1992). Much circumspection and improvisation also went into obtaining resources for curriculum and instruction. In his autobiography Daniel Payne, the later-to-be-renowned African American educator, recalled sitting outside his schoolroom door in Charleston, South Carolina during the early 1830s:

I had a geography, but had never seen an atlas, and what was more, knew not where to get one. Fortunately for me, one day as I was sitting on the piazza endeavoring to learn some lesson, a woman entered the gate and approached me with a book in her hand. Said she: "Don't you want to buy this book?" Taking it, I opened it, and to my great joy beheld the colored maps of an atlas—the very thing I needed.... Immediately I went to work with my geography and atlas, and in about six months was able to construct maps on the Mercator's projection and globular projection. After I had acquired this ability I introduced geography and map-reading into my school (Payne 1883:29).

In this episode a chance encounter with a woman seeking a buyer for an atlas, opened the way for a new phase of self-teaching and a new curriculum for the students in Payne's school. In Varenne's language (chapter 2), the atlas mapped a new and long-sought periphery. The atlas's author, its vendor, and the authors and books Payne consulted in order to prepare to instruct others in the classroom, were all recruited by him as associates on a moving field of transformation. In McDermott's, however briefly, it opened the way to new forms of articulateness (1988).

Legally free yet tightly constrained by both laws and racist social conventions, Payne could maintain a school largely because, as Janet Cornelius has shown, white Charlestonians considered an educated black labor pool advantageous to their business ventures (Cornelius 1991:38–43). Two types of education were especially double-edged in relation to enslavers and their opponents, and cutting-edge for initiatives toward change: literacy and skilled trades. From the enslavers' perspective, skilled workers were both useful on the premises and to hire out on a contract basis. Relatively widespread opportunities for both types of

learning compared to the countryside could be found in cities like Charleston, a center of shipping, banking, and production of commercial wares. However, whites' fear of free and educated blacks was heightened by the Denmark Vesey slave revolt plot of 1822 which involved free, literate craftspeople as well as the enslaved (Starobin 1975). The rapid circulation of David Walker's *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*, which the author had printed privately in Boston in 1829, contributed to further hope or escalation of fear depending upon one's position in the slavery system (Pease and Pease 1974:287-92). Walker was a skilled printer and author who had escaped to Boston where he tapped into networks of fellow abolitionists and coastal sailors to distribute his work. The rebellion led by literate Nat Turner in 1831 pushed the balance of white opinion over the top, leading to immediate anti-literacy legislation across the South and closure of virtually all schooling for blacks by 1835.

Yet closing and forbidding schools were about as effective at stopping education as the outlawing of drums that followed the Stono Rebellion of 1739 (Wood 1975) was for halting long-distance communication and the call to resist: just as many alternative means of percussion and communication were found, so too modes of education. Walker's *Appeal* was a case in point, along with the larger abolitionist literature of which it was a part. Such documents were simultaneously protests and *de facto* primers and instruction manuals for self-liberation, educating the enslaved as to potential escape routes along with the informational potentials of print. Obviously, one did not need to be literate to participate, for word-of-mouth exponentially extended any document's reach. In any case, for most, schools were not lost because they had not been available in the first place unless the enslaved created them in hiding. Mrs. Mandy Jones of Harrison County, Mississippi, recalled during an FWP interview in the 1930s:

De slaves would run away sometimes, an hide out in de big woods. Dey would dig pits, an kiver the spot wid bushes an' vines, an mebbe lay out fer a whole year. An' dey had pit schools in slave days too. Way out in de woods, dey was woods den, an de slaves would slip out o' de Quarters at night, an go to dese pits, an some niggah dat had some learnin' would have a school.

While schools like this seem to have been uncommon, (but who could know for certain?) the enslaved initiated school-like instructional settings when feasible. The hiddenness of these settings, possibly even from

looser tongued persons within participants' own communities, reveals something of the inadequacy of terms like "formal" and "informal" in the face of realities on—or in—the ground, as in the pit schools described below.

HIDDEN LITERACY EDUCATION UNDER SLAVERY

More often the circumstances of plantation life seem to have compelled friends and relatives to share knowledge cautiously among themselves in a face-to-face manner not so different from the ways in which Scribner and Cole (1981) found twentieth century West African Vai teaching each other the Vai script during interludes among other activities. While the general significance of this research has been appreciated, it is well also to remember that the Vai were important brokers in the illegal slave trade to the Carolinas and that enslavement of neighboring peoples in Liberia and Sierra Leone such as the Temne and Mende is well documented (Holsoe 1977). Hence, it seems more likely than not that practices important among these groups traveled across the Atlantic.

Secrecy was and is an integral aspect of communication and religious practice throughout West and Central Africa. Scholars such as Beryl Bellman (1984), Lancy (1975, 1980), Studsill (1979) and Akinnaso (1992) have claimed that in various African societies, initiation and divination systems provided instruction that resembled formal education in Western schooling. Lancy has shown that secret society-like procedures appeared to carry over from the Poro Society into the Liberian public schools (1975:379). The Poro society for men and Sande society for women crosscut ethnic lines in forest regions of Liberia and Sierra Leone, where the predations of the slave trade still linger in memory (Shaw 2002). Obvious from the somewhat dated term "secret society" that anthropologists and colonial administrators applied to associations like Poro and Sande, secrecy and layered access to knowledge were salient features of their organization. In other words, although the institution of American slavery was in itself a necessary and sufficient reason for hidden education, Africans also arrived on these shores well schooled to orchestrate hidden education on their own foundations, for their own ends. The tip of the ice burg of this legacy endures in wordplay, indirection, and a host of proverbs concerning the cultural appropriateness of layered mediated access to information: Do not cast pearls before swine. You knew it was a snake when you picked it up. Tell only half of what you know.

Because of this history, therefore, enslaved African descendants' educational practices likely involved at least three types of hiddenness:

activities purposefully concealed from oppressors; those rendered invisible because they masked within the ordinariness of everyday life; and those that were layered from *surface* to *deep* knowledge according to indigenous theories regarding the degree of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical preparedness appropriate for participation.

Harriet Ware, a northern teacher who worked behind Union lines on captured Sea Island rice plantations during the Civil War, recounted in her diary an incident that illustrates the encounter of “Western” school education with this layered approach to knowledge.

Monday, June 9 [1862]. Found that Bacchus’ brother Lester had been taken sick Sunday morning and died at night...Just after dinner we saw the people assembling at their burying-place and H. and I went down to witness the services. Uncle Sam followed us, book in hand and spectacles on nose, reading as he walked. As we grew near to the grave we heard all the children saying their A,B,C through and through again, as they stood waiting around the grave for the rest to assemble and for Uncle Sam to begin. Each child had his school-book or picture-book Mr. G. had given him in his hand,—another proof that they consider their lessons some sort of religious exercise (Ware 1969:65).

This vignette consists of children in the Sea Islands performing the ABCs at the funeral of one of their schoolmates (Raboteau 1978:240, 1995:1-2). Cornelius points out that sometimes blue-back spellers were used interchangeably with the Bible, and some preachers even conducted marriages with the speller in hand (1991:93). Harriet Ware interpreted this as evidence that the children saw educational activity as spiritually efficacious (Ware 1969:62-68). According to Daniel Littlefield, between 30 and 40 percent of the African descended population of the southern Atlantic coast came from Congo-Angola, about the same number from Liberia and Sierra Leone—the latter being especially favored because of their expertise in rice cultivation,—and the remainder from other areas such as the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra, with a scattering of Muslims among all of them (Littlefield 1981:20–21, 109–114; Wood 1974:95–130, 333–341). The former residents of Sierra Leone and Liberia either lived in or passed through the very areas where Poro and Sande societies were active (Creel 1990:77–78, 90–91).

Yet, even without necessarily drawing on such transatlantic associations, the Blue Back speller could also take on significance akin to an heirloom or ancestral relic because of the depth of effort and familial connection associated with it. In the words of a preacher, Elder Green:

My father was a good man but I didn't see much of him because he belonged to different people. They let him come once a week to see us. I was always glad for him to come because he could read a little and he taught me about all I ever learned out of the Blue Back Speller. I was anxious to learn and I wouldn't hesitate about asking anybody to tell me something. Once in a while my mistress would let me and my cousin go over to the adjoining plantation where my father was. This gave me a chance to learn more, for the slave children over there knew more than we did... Whenever I went over there wasn't much playing for me. I got around them and asked so many questions they had to stop and tell me something. In this way I learned a little something and by the time I was sold I had covered fifteen pages in the Blue Back Speller (Rawick 1972 vol. 19:147).

When my father's mistress found out that I couldn't read she called my father and told him that he would have to buy me a book. He promised to do it and he did. One of the last things he said to me was, "Son, here is a blue-back spelling book. Keep it with you as long as it lasts and when it wears out buy another one." I kept it for years and years (Rawick 1972 vol. 19:166-167).

Throughout the South, enslaved children and adults not only learned from their parents and children, but also gained information about numbers, counting, the alphabet and spelling by "playing school," sometimes in hiding, sometimes in plain view in the plantation yard, despite the punishments that awaited them if white adults found out. White children bartered bits of schooled education for apples, oranges or marbles. White adults sometimes traded instruction for liquor or cash. When playing school white children usually assumed the role of the teacher, passing along basic skills. From that point on African American learners proceeded rapidly on their own. As an antebellum white traveler through the South noted:

I was much pleased with the account I got of a [N]egro blacksmith in this neighborhood [Mobile], whose passion for learning made him allure the white boys into his smithy, as they passed to and from the school. The boys wrote on the blackened wall the alphabet, and taught him the sound of the letters. Thence he proceeded to syllables and words, under the same youthful instructors. Having learned to read, he taught himself writing

and arithmetic, algebra and geometry, and was studying Latin and Greek, when he was discovered by a Christian gentleman... The sum of eighteen hundred dollars was raised... The liberty of himself and family was purchased, and he was sent out to Liberia... [H]ere there is no idea of liberation without expatriation, as if to render the sweets of liberty as bitter and undesirable as possible, and to present no alternative to the poor [N]egro but helpless bondage or hopeless exile (Lewis 1845:176–177).

It has often been pointed out that in African American history the concepts of literacy and freedom intertwine (Raboteau 1995:1, Dalton 1991–92, Parker 1993:39–42). Cornelius has argued convincingly that because of the habit of hiding literacy from whites, which probably carried over into the post-bellum period, and because FWP interview questions were skewed by gender, the percentage of literate enslaved people on U.S. plantations was closer to ten per cent than the five per cent usually claimed (Cornelius 1991:8–9). In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s introduction to a collection of narratives by formerly enslaved authors, “[T]here is an inextricable link in Afro-American tradition between literacy and freedom... As Ishmael Reed put the matter in his fictional slave narrative, *Flight to Canada* (1976), the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away” (Gates 1987:ix).

In real life, one such person was C.L. Hall, interviewed in Canada by the American Freedman’s Inquiry Commission in 1863, after his successful escape from bondage in Maryland. “[T]he more I read,” he said “the more I fought against slavery. Finally, I thought I would make an attempt to get free, and have liberty or death” (Blassingame 1977:417). But as William L. Andrews has pointed out, more than escape was involved in autobiographical narratives like Hall’s. Even in the so-called free states prejudice against black citizens made writing an autobiography a liberating activity: “a very public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom, and then assigning it to oneself” (1986:xi). Furthermore, as a genre these narratives comprised a pedagogy of transformation, showing how the new futures of a few could become the destiny of the many through the engines of hope, moral indignation, and concerted action.

Literate skill was also practical; it allowed African Americans to write passes and transit documents to gain freer movement on the roads and better opportunities to escape slavery altogether. James Wiggins, interviewed in Maryland, described his father to an FWP interviewer:

[A] carpenter by trade, he was hired out... to repair and build barns, fences, and houses. I have been told that my father could

read and write. Once he was charged with writing passes for some slaves in the county, as a result of this he was given 15 lashes by the sheriff of the county, immediately afterwards he ran away, went to Philadelphia, where he died working to save money to purchase my mother's freedom through a white Baptist minister in Baltimore (Rawick 1972, vol. 16, Maryland, 66).

Showing a truly Brer Rabbit style of finesse, The Reverend Emperor Williams, interviewed in 1879, recalled in third person:

While a slave Williams sometimes carried a pass, written by himself, which read as follows: "Permit the boy Emperor to pass and repass, and oblige Mr. Williams." His master, whose name was Williams, saw it, and the following colloquy took place:

"Where did you learn to write like that?"

"While I was collecting your rent, sir."

"My name, is that?"

"No, sir; that is not your name, but mine. I would not commit a forgery" (Blassingame 1977:621).

The process by which the narrator acquired literacy formed an important part of autobiographies. James Fisher told an interviewer in 1843:

I...thought it wise to learn to write, in case opportunity should offer to write myself a pass. I copied every scrap of writing I could find, and thus learned to write a tolerable hand before I knew what the words were that I was copying. At last I met with an old man who, for the sake of money to buy whiskey, agreed to teach me the writing alphabet... I spent a good deal of time trying to improve myself; secretly, of course. One day, my mistress happened to come into my room, when my materials were about; and she told her father... that I was learning to write. He replied that if I belonged to him, he would cut my right hand off (Blassingame 1977:234).

Similarly,

When Titus [B. Byrnes of Titusville, Florida] was five or six years of age [on a plantation near Charleston, South Carolina] he was... groomed... for the job of houseboy. Although he never received any education, Byrnes was quick to learn. He could tell the time of day and distinguish one newspaper from another. He recalled an incident which happened when he was about eight years of age which led him to conceal his precociousness. One day while writing on the ground, he heard his mistress' little daughter tell her mother that he was writing about water. Mistress Plowden called him and told him that if he were caught writing again his right arm would be cut off. From then on his precociousness vanished (Rawick 1972, Florida, vol. 17:220–221).

Despite the hopes and educational efforts focused on literacy, the enslaved did not regard reading and writing as always good but rather fraught with the duplicity rife in the other contexts of their lives. As Ellen Butler, enslaved in Louisiana, told her interviewer:

When the white folks go off they writes on the meal and flour with they fingers. Then they know if us steals meal. Sometime they take a stick and write in front of the door so if anybody go out they step on that writin' and massa know. That the way us larn how to write (Rawick 1972 vol. 4 pt. 1:177).

Cornelius (1991:93-94) has drawn attention to stories of miraculous literacy acquisition and their relationship to African traditions of spirit possession, reinterpreted in a Christian context, excerpting a remarkable passage from the Federal Writers Project Alabama narratives. Young Bartley Hamburg Townsley, a “waitman” for a planter in Pike County, Georgia, told his story in the third person:

One night, when he had gone to bed and had fallen to sleep, he dreamed that he was in a white room, and its walls were the whitest he ever saw. He dreamed that some one came in and wrote the alphabet on the wall in large printed letters, and began to teach him every letter, and when he awoke he had learned every letter, and as early as he could get a book, he obtained one and went hard to work (Rawick 1979 supp. ser. 2 (VI):300).

Accounts similar to this one are not uncommon. In some autobiographies the ease with which the narrator learns reading and writing, with or without divine aid, heralds a special destiny.

Perhaps the most famous narrative involving the theme of rapid literacy acquisition theme is Nat Turner's confession, dictated to Thomas R. Gray (and possibly extensively edited by him) while Turner awaited execution for leading the slave revolt of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia. Looking back over his life, Turner recalled signs that led him to believe that he was marked for a special destiny, beginning with the ease with which he learned to read.

To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant... it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed, and although this subject principally occupied my thoughts...The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet—but to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shewn to me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects—this was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks—and this learning was constantly improved at all opportunities...(Gray 1968:100).

Turner also told Gray that his precocity caused his master to say that “I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to anyone as a slave” (Gray 1968:100). Nevertheless, Turner was forced to remain in bondage.

Accounts like those of Ellen Butler, Reverend Emperor William, and Nat Turner all imply that the narrator him or herself has assumed the role not only of teller but also of teacher and performer. The mother wit and leadership of such persons also readily becomes the stuff of others' stories, also told with an educational edge.

EXPRESSIVE PRACTICES AND EDUCATION

F. Roy Johnson, a publisher and resident of Murfreesboro, North Carolina, which adjoins Southampton County, Virginia, investigated Nat Turner's Rebellion and its legacy in the folklore of the area from the 1950s to the early 1970s. He found local memory remarkably alive on the subject, and collected a number of stories about Turner. The following story from Maggie Artis and Persie Claud of Boykins, Virginia, expands

on Turner's autobiographical account of learning to read.

The blacks must have been greatly impressed by his claim [that he started spelling without instruction] for there has survived to this day a folk story which explains how Nat learned his letters:

One day while Nat was at play in the back of his mother's garden... a voice spoke to him, "Son, the time has come for you to begin your learning." At first Nat thought it was his master speaking to him, but he looked and saw no one. Then the voice spoke again, "Look at the fig tree and the holly tree and you will see."

A fig tree and a holly tree were near at hand, and Nat gathered some leaves from each of them, spread these on the ground and sat down to play. Then he knew that voice came not from one of this earth, for upon the leaves which lay before him were plainly inscribed certain lines and forms. And as he looked at them his tongue was unloosened and he called aloud the meaning of what he saw.

"Here is an 'A.'"

"Here is a 'B.'"

"There is a 'T.'"

At this time his mother came into the garden and heard him talking. She asked him, "Son, what are you doing?"

"Learning my letters."

"But there is no one here to help you."

"They were on the leaves, and that man is teaching me."

His mother saw no one and heard no one, and so her belief that her son was directed by some patron spirit was strengthened. So she said, "Come into the house and I will help you."

When Nancy got the book and started to teach her son, she was more amazed than before. He recited to her the whole alphabet through when but a short time before he did not know a single letter (Johnson 1970:37).

This story hints at the power of the ABCs (not so distant from abracadabra) as keys to knowledge. The case of Ma Sue Atcherson is

somewhat similar. A respected healer from La Grange, Georgia, Ma Sue received the call to heal and teach when she was about forty years old. Reportedly, the call came in the middle of a family crisis. A group of white people were chasing Ma Sue's father with guns and bloodhounds, and Ma Sue was chasing them. Suddenly, a voice called Ma Sue's name, telling her to "Go home and minister to God's people.' On returning home Ma Sue picked up a Bible and easily read it. Until that time she had been illiterate" (Noll 1991:127). A student from West Georgia College met Ma Sue when the healer was 102 years old. The student took some of her textbooks to Ma Sue and found that she could read them "like an educated person" although she never attended school (Noll 1991:128).

Such stories seem mysterious if one expects that learning to read requires school-like instructional procedures, but they are also quite consistent with ethnographic accounts of literacy acquisition from other parts of the world (Conklin 1949, Scribner and Cole 1981). Further, the "educational" content of stories like those of Nat Turner and Ma Sue Atcherson stresses the importance of commitment to God, others and oneself, not just "success" in schooled terms. Such stories "educate" holistically by providing guidance toward a well-lived life.

FWP interviewees also wove stories implicitly based on this idea of education into the "facts" of history as they tried to communicate with white interviewers. For example, Margaret Nickerson of Leon County, Florida, recounted the torments that William A. Carr and his overseers inflicted on George Bull:

[H]e could read and write and...de white folks didn't lak no nigger whut could read and write. Carr's wife Miss Jane useter teach us Sunday School but she did not 'low us to tech a book wid us hands. So dey useter jes take uncle George Bull and beat him fur nothin; dey would beat him and take him to de lake and put him on a log and shev him in de lake, but he always swimmid out. when didn' do dat dey would beat him tel de blood run outen him and den trow him in de ditch in de field and kiver him up wid dirt, head and years and den stick a stick up at his head. I wuz a water toter and had stood and seen um do him dat way more'n once and I stood and looked at um tel de went 'way to de other rows and den I grabbed de dirt ofen him an he'd bresh de dirt of and say 'tank yo', git his hoe and and go back to work. de beat him lak dat and he didn' do a thin' to git dat sort uf treatment (Rawick 1972, Florida, vol. 17:253).

There seem to be at least two layers of “hidden education” in this story: Instruct the child who rescues you that, by saying “thank you” even when you have been buried alive, you cannot fail not only to “out wit and out-flank” but also tremendously to outclass your tormentors! Instruct the white interviewer of the evils his or her people perpetrated, and of the price some paid for the very skill the interviewer is displaying in writing down notes on the interview.

Despite prohibitions against their literacy, skilled artisans occasionally included instructive written messages on their works. For example, a famous enslaved potter named Dave, (circa 1800-1870, known as Dave Drake, after Emancipation), who also worked for a newspaper, inscribed rhymed couplets on ceramic vessels in Edenton, South Carolina in the 1830s through 1850s at a time when teaching blacks to read was illegal.

For example... “this jar is made cross / if you don’t repent you may be lost,” may have reflected his feelings about slavery, religion, or both... Dave probably was reflecting on freedom when he wrote, “The Fourth of July is surely come / to sound the fife and beat the drum” (Burton 1985:152).

Orville Burton has shown that Dave’s words convey cryptic messages. The verse quoted above implicitly links the Independence Day celebrations of whites with enslaved people’s attempts at liberation during the Stono Rebellion of 1739, after which they were prohibited from beating drums (Burton 1985:148). Dave also wrote this poignant couplet on a large storage jar: “I wonder where is all my relation...Friendship to all—and every nation.” As Allison Germanso has written, “This plaintive statement makes the observer wonder about the fate of Dave’s family in a culture” in which enslavers “placed little value on [the] family life” of those they held in bondage (Germanso 1999:15).

Dave’s verses were inscribed in a space controlled by enslavers on vessels made for those same enslavers to buy for their households. Yet most of the people who actually grew, put up, and prepared the foods stored in Dave’s jars were enslaved like him—as he doubtless knew. Thus Dave’s verses, like the Margaret Nickerson’s and Reverend Emperor Williams’s accounts and the voices of generations before and after them, use classic modes of African American indirection to address at least two audiences simultaneously: members of their own group and members of the group of outsiders who oppress them. This doubling encodes and renders audible and visible W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous concept of “double consciousness” (1938, Early 1993).

Double voicing, and double vision – and/or double sightedness—have of course retained their vitality in expressive culture through the Twentieth and into the Twenty-first Century, so much so that it is almost impossible to venture far into American popular culture without encountering them. Two examples from my hometown, Chattanooga, Tennessee, are fairly typical. The first, a modest exhibition in the foyer of the Chattanooga Afro-American Museum, itself located at the time downstairs in a city office building, showed photographs of a neighborhood called Cameron Hill before it was bulldozed in the early 1960s to make way for The Golden Gateway, a commercial zone of chain car dealerships and chain stores. By the time of the exhibition in 1987 the Golden Gateway had become an urban wasteland of defunct businesses. Thus, from one perspective, the photographs in the exhibition contrasted a vibrant black neighborhood with the failed white one that it was killed to produce: something black visitors to the museum grasped immediately. But it took only trivial ethnographic effort to determine that, from the perspective of the white city government officials with offices upstairs, the images merely showed “slum clearance” on the way to “urban renewal.” Nearby, a sign suspended on the side of a large brick church employed the same rhetorical politic, doubling the hyphenated name “Jes-us” with the community of Saved African Americans: “Jes-Us” (see Varennes’s introduction to this collection and Gundaker 1998:26).¹

INDIGENOUS EDUCATIONAL THEORY FROM THE QUARTER

Such doubling, of course, was and is so well understood that it occurs spontaneously, as a “given” among likeminded persons within contexts that are or can turn hostile at any moment. It stems from a worldview, a set of epistemological premises and to recognize and articulate premises is in effect to theorize, whether or not one controls the publication and academic venues that give Theory its capital “T.” As Gregory Bateson pointed out, lions *know* they eat gazelles and thus do not need instruction on their diet to prompt them into the chase. On a less “deep” level, rats in mazes learn not only about the food researchers present, but also about the context in which the search for food takes place (Bateson 1972). African descendants, and Africans before them, have also “learned to learn” that contexts are themselves contextualized and that happenings on one “level” may contradict those on another. For example, in the narrative quoted above, Elder Green’s mistress encouraged his father to teach him to read, but also sold the young Green away so that he never saw his father again. Such conditions certainly encourage people to examine premises and find language to further their transforma-

tion! In sum, then, the double language of “hidden education” in the Quarter addresses both the world as it “is” and the world as it could or should be; the world that outsiders control and the one that insiders are continually educating each other to make. Thus, it seems the enslaved have contributed a more complex theory of education than that which informs much of today’s schooling. Similarly, they have left a legacy of valuable educative skills that schools today often undervalue: knowing how to say more than one thing at a time; scanning for opportunity, grasping material and participatory complexity; recruiting networks and distributing information; and sorting truths from lies.

Note

1 Compare with Ishmael Reed’s novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, justly famed for its irrepressible hero/ force “Jes Grew.”

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