

DICKINSON
COLLEGE

FOUNDED 1773

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Dear Barbara -

Sorry I'm missing
you today - we're so busy
at a conference but I did
want to give you a copy of

Jamie's paper, the transcript of
your interview, & part of Kane's
paper. Also inside the little
Kachmiri booklet is your present

from this long go summer!

Bob, Chuck & I are planning
to attend the celebration on →

April - so if we don't see
you before, we'll definitely
see you then.

Hope all is well -

Take care & many
thanks again for all
your help & interest fall,
for being you!

All the Best,
Diana

Rana Chapman

Although the issue of emancipation may be controversial, for the first time, blacks were leaving their homes in order to find a new life. "When I saw Washington D.C., for the first time in 1926, I thought I'd never seen a prettier place. Down where I come from, Spring Hope, North Carolina, there wasn't nothing, not a single thing to compare with what I saw here" (Golden 164).

By the 1930's, two million blacks had migrated North. A whole new way of life developed, yet the pressures and stresses of society still existed in the new environment.

"There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in sickly air. People can be slave ships in shoes... Things and circumstance gave life a most depressing odor" (Hurstson 60).

These struggles were too difficult to bear alone, they necessitated an extended family which provided love and support. According to Gutman, there was a large change black household around 1925. In the city, economic need necessitated other lodgers, or subfamilies to live with nuclear families (Gutman 454). This was the beginning of a larger kinship network developing, where the extended family was of vital importance (Gutman 456).

"Black families were typically not big, you know they did not have a lot of children... they tried to keep as close as possible... We did cling to each other more you know, during the

1900's up until the early part of the 60's and 70's. You know, with extended families coming into the house, because it was slavery, and people going this way and that way and people trying to get away from whatever. People had to change names, and they lost family. So if you have family, if you got a family you hold onto it, because there's not a lot of people that can actually go back and find their beginnings, their roots" (Barksdale Interview 17).

During this time, the African American family was largely in tact. In New York City, only 0.3% were male absent households (Gutman 455). This demonstrates that the the rise in illegitimate children and female headed households, is a Twentieth Century phenomena that occurs with the rise of the urban ghetto (Staples 307). Throughout history, the African American family has acted as a buffer towards the racism and pressures associated with living in America.

From the period of slavery, emancipation, and migration to the present day, family stories, folklore and religion have played an integral role in the familial unit functioning as an institution in a racist society. It has kept the African American community's culture alive. In keeping these stories and emotions alive, it bridges the gap often left in history books. "Our folklore was the antidote used by our parents to help us counteract the poison of self-hate engendered racism" (Morgan XIII). Its roots may be in slavery, but these stories and others which follow are essential to the resistance of the black community today.

Folklore of the African American community began with legends of

Africa. The stories were then adapted to fit the experiences of blacks in the Western Hemisphere during the time of slavery (Courlander 254-255). There are certain general stories that were told about the master and the slave. The themes were humorous at times, spiritual, and often reflected the human experience (Courlander 257). These stories may have begun in the soil of the South, but they foster many of the struggles that African Americans face today.

In the attached story, John was a slave who saved the Master's children. The old Master promised to set John free after the raising of the crops. When it came time to set John free, the Master told John that the family loved him. As John began his journey, the Master hollered to him that they loved him, but reminded him the place he held in society. "But 'member John, youse a nigger." Even when John was free, his Master chained him to his slave days and the society he would confront during the most racist point in American history. As the Master kept calling to him, John kept walking enduring the road that lay ahead.

A TREASURY OF AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE

John Saves Old Master's Children

Ole John was a slave, you know. And there was Ole Massa and Ole Missy and de two li' children—a girl and a boy.

Well, John was workin' in de field and he seen de children out on de lake in a boat, just a hollerin'. They had done lost they oars and was 'bout to turn over. So then he went and tole Ole Massa and Ole Missy.

Well, Ole Missy, she hollered and said: "It's so sad to lose these 'cause Ah ain't never goin' to have no more children." Ole Massa made her hush and they went down to de water and follered de shore on 'round till they found 'em. John pulled off his shoes and hopped in and swum out and got in de boat wid de children and brought 'em to shore.

Well, Massa and John take 'em to de house. So they was all so glad 'cause de children got saved. So Massa told 'im to make a good crop dat year and fill up de barn, and den when he lay by de crops nex' year, he was going to set him free.

So John raised so much crop dat year he filled de barn and had to put some of it in de house.

So Friday come, and Massa said, "Well, de day done come that I said I'd set you free. I hate to do it, but I don't like to make myself out a lie. I hate to git rid of a good nigger lak you."

So he went in de house and give John one of his old suits of clothes to put on. So John put it on and come in to shake hands and tell 'em goodbye. De children they cry, and Ole Missy she cry. Didn't want to see John go. So John took his bundle and put it on his stick and hung it crost his shoulder.

Well, Ole John started on down de road. Well, Ole Massa said, "John, de children love yuh."

"Yassuh."

"John, I love yuh."

"Yassuh."

"And Missy like yuh!"

"Yassuh."

"But 'member, John, youse a nigger."

"Yassuh."

Fur as John could hear 'im down de road he wuz hollerin', "John, Oh John! De children loves you. And I love you. De Missy like you."

John would holler back, "Yassuh."

"But 'member youse a nigger, tho!"

Ole Massa kept callin' 'im and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin' to Canada. He answered Old Massa every time he called 'im, but he consumed on wid his bag.

Barbara does not remember stories of princesses and their castles,
that are often associated with a young girl.

"Well he told us stories, but he told us stories about the South. Some of his stories weren't all that... Cheerful. You know because he gets into that state of mind where he gets thinking too much down South, you know, and how he had to live and sharecropping and not gettin money for what you have raised. And... ohh [sigh]. He didn't talk about the lynching. Uncle James talked about the lynchings. You could tell there were

certain things that he just wouldn't share because they were just too, too painful" (Barksdale Interview 13).

The memories were not easy to share, but are the only link to the real history in the community and the South.

Over time the folklore was often adjusted to fit the present circumstance. City life altered the context of the story, but it still reflected the pressures and struggles of the individual (Courlander 257). In folk tales, people told stories of body snatchers and other conditions to warn them of the dangers of city streets (Borchert 208). Stories about past experiences in the South may have been told in order to preserve the culture and experience of the African American. The stories are full of description and play an important role in the socialization of children.

Tar Beach is a children's book written by Faith Ringgold that beautifully ties in a story quilt with a paintings and narratives. The story use to be written on fabric strips placed around the quilt, where Ringgold used this technique in order to tell stories of the black female in America. In the book, fabric pieces are placed running along the page. The quilt pattern resembles the geometric shapes, used in earlier African-influenced quilts. The story is an interpretation of her childhood memories of growing up in Harlem (Ringgold Afterword). Tar Beach is the roof Cassie Louise Lightfoot's neighboring apartment building where she can lie on her back and soaks in all that surrounds her.

“Lying on the roof in the night, with stars and skyscraper buildings all around me, made me feel rich, like I owned all that I could see” (Ringgold 4).

Cassie’s favorite possession was the George Washington Bridge. She made it hers by letting the stars fall down around her, and lifting her up to the bridge. Her daddy worked on the bridge and it opened on the day she was born in 1931. She had always wanted to own the bridge. To capture the beauty of the bridge she would fly above it. Flying to Cassie meant that “I am free to go wherever I want for the rest of my life” (Ringgold 9).

Throughout the book the image of flying is used in order to feel free and go wherever without restrictions. She wants to fly over the Union building so he can “own” it, so he can have a job and so her mother won’t cry all winter. Cassie uses tar beach to escape the restrictions of Harlem. “All you need is somewhere to go that you can’t get to any other way. The next thing you know, you’re flying among the stars.” The theme of flying is important in African American folklore. Many slaves spoke of “flying to freedom” to escape enslavement (Ringgold Afterword). Ringgold uses such symbols of flying and quilts to combine her dreams with African American history and folklore.

Symbols often tell a story of what is significant in people’s lives. In speaking with Barbara Barksdale, I asked her if she were to have a family crest what symbols she would put in it. At first she stared at me a little funny and laughed, as she told me black families never had a coat

of arms. She told me her first symbol would be a military symbol due to the fact that her uncle attended West Point and became the only black colonel in WWI. The next symbol in her coat of arms would be a hoe "representing the sweat, you know the tears of sweat, um the strength of my family line. You know the tilling of soil of American life, cuz we have played so many instrumental roles in the United States and never given the honor for it" (Barksdale Interview 22). Barbara would also include an apron and nurses cap because of the care giving and domestic work traditionally done by African American women "symbolizing all of the care that we had to give to the United States people" (Barksdale Interview 22).

"And last but not least, the Book. The most important part the Bible. You know. I should have put it first though, but last but not least. And its definitely the Bible, because upon things with the United States, everything that we have learned as human beings... The embodiment of people here, you know, we had to build it on a faith we had been given, handed down by grandparents, great great grandparents and so on. The things that I will hand down to my children" (Barksdale Interview 22).

Throughout time, folklore and religion have been intertwined in the African American community. A vast amount of the folk music is based in Christianity (Courlander 256). Faith has been a theme throughout the black history. In a world that is unjust, Christianity provides an outlet, a new perspective, and hope. Many times in stories about migration, the North will be referred to as the "Promised Land" (Gutman 1976).

Congregations will sing of the hope fostered in the Underground Railroad. "Black churches are a unique social entity in that they were developed by an oppressed group that was refused access to the institutional life of a broader American society" (Bell 10). Many churches that are largely African American contain musical folklore and a sense of overcoming the pressures of a largely racist and secular world.

In order to keep a community and culture alive, each generation must pass on their strength and history to their children. The themes occur in what the children are given, as well as taught. I asked Barbara what book she would pass on to her children, besides the Bible. Her answer culminated the thoughts and points of my paper with her emotions and experiences

"The book that I have not yet written. That would have all the information about their lineage... And within that book, I would like to make sure that little Janelle and whomever else that might come [laughs] could have, you know. Who they are, why they're here, why they're still in existence, how they got there make up, because thank God we had strong people, because if they would have been killed off because of slavery, or war, or whatever, there wouldn't be any Barbara Barksdale. There wouldn't be a Janelle." (Barksdale Interview 23).

The telling and retelling of stories through generations, is the key to understanding the conditions which African Americans have faced throughout history. Folklore can act as a socializing agent as well as a form of generating hope. In either perspective, it has been vital to the black community in the past and remains important in discovering

African American identity today.

Final Thoughts

The research I have done thus far has given me a strong basis for the study of the African American Community. There are still many books I could read and people I could speak with to give me further insight. The important theme to remember is in listening and sharing we learn more about society and ourselves. This paper could go in many directions because the research has lead to a process of understanding rather than a final point. We must take a better look into preceding generations, to fill in the history books and the lives of those brought to a "free" country as slaves not by their own accord. The only way to reach the truth is by sharing personal histories and experiences.

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