

Bonn Turkington

Warriner

ENG 556

10/5/20

Final: Literacy Narrative

Nerma Cockrell

I selected the Nerma Cockrell narrative “Literacy Learning in Rural Mississippi” for my reflection. Cockrell presents an interesting case in the study of literacy, as she defies traditional expectations of her humble roots to gain fluency in multiple literacies and create opportunities for personal and community growth. I will look at her narrative videos through three perspectives: first, who has sponsored her literacy and to what end? Second, the value of her specific literacies in her local setting and a national setting. Third, the benefit of her “Critical Bifocality,” (Clifton, 75) as a method of embracing her local and familial literacies and succeeding in the Educational English setting.

Sponsorship

One of the most fascinating parts of Cockrell’s narrative was her diverse set of literacy sponsors. Early in the class, we learned that sponsors are “Any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy-and gain advantage by it in some way,” (Brandt, 166). Sponsors are individuals or groups who enable someone to become fluent (or gain a basic understanding) of a specific literacy style or methodology, usually to their benefit.

Cockrell's narrative focuses significantly on her rural upbringing and her mother's role in the Civil Rights movement. As such, her narrative is presented through a racial and political lens, as much of her childhood and memories involve her mother and father's strong ideals and empowering actions. It's also viewed through a lens of education—or the lack thereof (her parents only reaching the eighth grade). Looking at the objective facts of Cockrell's upbringing it would be easy to think of Cockrell as growing up uneducated and telling a story of trying to become literate and facing adversity trying to overcome what could be considered the standard African American Civil Rights troubles—finding a job, being mistreated in public, poor education and healthcare and so on. After all, at her birth, she was set up to be firmly planted on the wrong side of the Great Divide. Yet she provides an entirely different and unique tale.

Three minutes into the first video interview Cockrell says of her family that “She [her mother] was always very supportive, we always had to do our homework...actually, within our family of seven [brothers and sisters] kids, we were very bright. Academically we were pretty good kids.” Despite growing up in rural Mississippi during a time and place that made it difficult for children of color to learn, Cockrell's mother instilled in her and her siblings the value of literacy and became her first major sponsor. Her parents, especially her mother, knew the importance of learning—not just school learning, but of all learning—and taught her everything from how to kill snakes and pick soybeans or how to read Bible verses.

Perhaps the most interesting sponsor in Cockrell's life came during her time in high school. About four minutes into the first video she relates her experience with the US military. “Some representatives from the military came and gave us some tests. One of them was talking to me [after the tests] and said ‘would you consider joining the military? You scored really,

really high in science and math and we could really use you!” Thanks to her mother’s firm intervention she did not join the military, but this was an unexpected opportunity for growing a specific literacy. During the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s, women were not typically viewed as perfect for roles in the military even if their qualifications were as good or better than a man’s. People of color had it even harder during this time. That a woman of color was sought by the US military speaks tremendously to her exceptional literacy skills and development fostered by her family from a young age. During this time the women mathematicians and coders who were responsible for helping the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo space programs find success were mistreated and ignored by the public at large. That small group of colored women was responsible for many of the major mathematical breakthroughs that allowed the US space program to begin and develop. Despite their efforts, they were largely ignored for decades even after the programs’ success. Yet, we see here the US military actively seeking Cockrell’s help and showing a willingness to sponsor her literacy in mathematics and science to contribute to what could have been any number of important national programs. That she did not join the military and learn those specific literacy skills takes nothing away from the rare sponsorship opportunity she experienced considering she grew up picking cotton and soybeans.

Finally, another major sponsor of her literacy was her local church. Two minutes into the third video she says that “Church was a part of our daily lives...In Sunday School we were allowed to read and to take a part in Sunday School.” She continues discussing how often she had to memorize scripture for Easter, Christmas, and other events. “We did a lot of memorization and public speaking. Other organizations worked along with the church-the

Masons, the Elks...those organizations worked together [in the community]...I won a contest with the Masons to help me go to college.”

Not only was the church itself promoting various literacies and teaching Cockrell how to read the language of scripture, speak publicly (which is definitely a distinct form of literacy!), and memorize Bible passages, but groups collaborated with the church to become multiple sponsors of literacy and enabled her to bridge knowledge gaps to find success in her own life. One sponsor, the Masons, even provided her a chance to go to college. This community collaboration transcended local literacy to enable a young woman of color from rural Mississippi to achieve what most would think impossible.

Value of Literacies and the Knowledge Gap

Daisy Christodoulou begins her essay by talking about the problems seemingly well-educated, intelligent, and fortunate students had with great knowledge gaps. “Even the bright and hard-working pupils seemed to me to have big gaps in their knowledge,” (27). She blames much of this gap on the perception of knowledge as a resource. “Knowledge was used in a very pejorative way. The idea was that you were supposed to focus on skills like analysis...but it seemed to me that a pupil needed to know something to be able to analyze it”.

A knowledge gap was due in part to the perception of what was valued in schools. Here we see the dominant literacy of College or Standard English mandating specific skills and requiring very focused traits to ‘learn to the test’. The struggles of what curriculums require versus what is valued in the wider world is difficult for middle-class children who “Pick up a lot of knowledge from home, from books, from programs on the radio, and so forth.” But the gap

is even greater in working-class children of immigrants who “Don’t always get those advantages,” (28).

A typical educational system relies on what Christodoulou says came from Paulo Freire, which is the “Banking Concept of education...Education becomes the act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor,” (29-30). For a young woman of color growing up in Mississippi and working on a farm in her youth, it seems obvious that Cockrell would have limited opportunities to encounter various literacies and acquire either the raw facts valued by education or the focused ability to analyze them, a problem which would compound over time and limit her opportunities to stretch beyond her rural farming roots. Instead, she was not only equipped for formal education, but learning in her youth.

Cockrell had an advantage from an early age, in that she grew up in an inquisitive and intelligent household. Towards the end of the third video she says “I had an older brother...I always thought he was so smart. He would always tease me and say ‘you were always so inquisitive’.” She goes on to mention how she would ask him all sorts of questions, would always seek knowledge (not just from him, but from the family and community as a whole). Contrast her early experience with what Christodoulou relates happens in the average classroom as seen above and you find that Cockrell learned the importance of facts and knowledge as a means to assessment, understanding, and developing greater literacies. “Thinking well requires knowing facts, and that’s true not just because you need something to think about...critical thinking processes such as reasoning and problem solving are intimately intertwined with factual knowledge,” (32). What the average school could not provide, the

family and community sponsors supplemented and helped Cockrell develop her analytical and knowledgeable mind. 4:40 into the third video she says, "I've never just liked words, I like to extract them...you know, what does this mean?" She loves analysis, and that analysis was grounded on the teaching of knowledge that other students didn't receive and meant "Pupils fail to learn."

Critical Bifocality

Knowledge and analysis alone will not produce the ability to properly situate one's position in both the local and public arenas. For instance, knowing a fact and analyzing it will not inherently lead to the ability to deliberate about that fact in a productive mode. One can still deliberate or argue in binary terms of win or lose. In "Argument As Dialogue across Difference", Jennifer Clifton says that "This binary thinking maintains a predetermined point of stasis, a point of impasse, [and] refuses to be open to other ways of seeing or constructing a point at which discourse *ought* to begin," (2). Being knowledgeable, being able to analyze, and literate enough to speak in front of others or discuss complex issues are all great, but to use those abilities to create change both in an individual life and in the public sphere requires more. And that more happens to be what Clifton calls "Critical Bifocality".

Clifton uses the metaphor of critical bifocality as a practice "For critically attending to the ways structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and at times, contest these same social/economic structures," (75). Later she says, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (76).

Clifton is expressing the idea that to approach and solve complicated life-problems globally and locally, introspective analysis and consideration are required. Cockrell, despite her humble and what many would consider illiterate and disadvantaged beginnings, is a perfect example of someone using her critical bifocals.

We have already looked at how inquisitive, intelligent, and dedicated Cockrell was as a youth. Her parents, despite being uneducated themselves (her mother only having an eighth-grade education), valued education enough to encourage her children to read and write, debate and memorize, and engage in multimodal learning. Nothing was off-limits. At the beginning of video two, she recalls how she read the Sears catalogue. “We didn’t have a lot, but we weren’t poor. We would get Sears catalogues and look through those and read the captions and pictures. We got our first TV set in 1956. We were the only people in the rural community then...we would watch TV and the neighbors would come and we’d all watch TV.”

Exposure to national issues (her mother’s involvement with the Civil Rights movement), diverse exposure to multiple literacies (from television and the Sears catalogue to Bible passages), and her involvement with multiple literacy sponsors (the local church, Masons, community through their television, and public speaking) The combination of uneducated parents instilling family values of God and education combined with a national perspective of various groups like masons and the military. Clifton goes on to quote Simmons and Grabill by saying “Community literacy scholars, likewise, not the most difficult and fragile task [is] to figure out where and how to listen,” (83). To engage in productive dialogue across difference one must learn to listen, not just shout to win. Cockrell’s family, friends, church, community, and neighbors provided an opportunity to engage and listen, to become an active member of

dialogue in both local and national (the Civil Rights movement her mother was involved in) as a child—and that ability only grew as she grew.

Summary

Cockrell presents a very interesting literacy narrative. A cursory look at the basic facts of her life would point towards her being relatively illiterate, unsuccessful, and marginalized—she is black, a woman, grew up in rural Mississippi to two uneducated parents during a time of extreme civil rights unrest, lived on a farm, and had a large family that needed to be taken care of. Despite the supposed cultural hurdles, Cockrell presents what could be the standard of literacy development and an example of how to navigate literacy sponsors, political movements, education, and social values to achieve her goals regardless of circumstances.

Despite growing up in what seems a limited and disabling environment, Cockrell was able to take full advantage of her social capital and literacy sponsors to develop literacy skills that would see her become an active part of several literacy groups. As Lam says in her article, “Social capital possessed by a person depends on the size of the network of connections that person can mobilize and on the amount and quality of resources possessed by their associates,” (5). Cockrell’s family provided instruction and motivation to develop reading and writing literacy, her church and community provided capital that allowed her to learn public speaking, memorization, and more complex forms of literacy (such as the language of the Bible), and her knowledge and analytical skills allowed her to stand out to literacy sponsors such as the Masons and US military. In short, she is a great example of what it means to be literate and how to put those skills to use. While there are certainly limitations some individuals face in the Great

Divide, curiosity, dedication, and effort can help anyone transcend their limitations and affect change in themselves and their communities.

Works Cited

Christodoulou, Daisy.

“Minding the Knowledge Gap: The Importance of Content in Student Learning”.

American Educator, Spring, 2014, pp. 27-33.

Clifton, Jennifer. *Argument As Dialogue Across Difference : Engaging Youth in Public Literacies*,

Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asulib-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4748622>.

Created from asulib-ebooks on 2020-09-29 06:30:30.

Cruickshank, Ken. “Literacy in Multilingual Contexts”. *Language and Education*.

Vol. 18, No. 6, 2004, pp. 459-473.

Flower, Linda. “Going Public in a Traditional IPO”. *Business Exit Strategies*.

2018, pp. 101-114.

Lam, Wan Shun Eva.

“Literacy and capital in immigrant youths’ online networks across countries”.

Learning, Media and Technology. Vol. 39, No. 4, 2014, pp. 488-506.