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Catherine H. Monaghan

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Recommended Citation

Monaghan, Catherine H. (2014). "Counter Narrative: Dr. Charles S. Johnson's influence on Myles Horton and Highlander," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/22>

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Counter Narrative: Dr. Charles S. Johnson's influence on Myles Horton and Highlander

Catherine H. Monaghan
Cleveland State University, USA

Keywords: Counter narrative, adult education and historical research

Abstract: This research examines the role of a prominent 20th Century sociologist, Dr. Charles S. Johnson on Myles Horton. It uncovers a connection in the field of adult education between the work of Dr. Johnson and Myles Horton. It pays tribute to Dr. Johnson's important influence on the work of Highlander.

Adult Education history has focused on Myles Horton and Highlander as a major catalyst of education efforts within the Civil Rights movement for Blacks and Whites. While Highlander was instrumental in this movement, a major piece of adult education history has been lost, if it was ever known, and needs to be revealed.

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between Myles Horton and Dr. Charles S. Johnson. It explored the question: How did Charles S. Johnson influence the work that Horton did at Highlander around the issue of Civil Rights? The significance of this research is in resurfacing the work of one of the 20th c preeminent sociologists and the first African-American President of Fisk University, an Historically Black University and College (HBCU) located in Tennessee, in order to insert it into the adult education literature as a counter narrative.

Methodology

Using historical evidence in the form of biographies and letters between Dr. Johnson and Myles Horton, Charles S. Johnson's work on race relations in the United States is examined. This research used the lens of critical race theory (Bell, 1987) and white privilege (Sullivan, 2006) to examine the stories of both and their intersection at an important time in the history of race relations in the United States and within the field of adult education.

The following questions were addressed to uncover the story of the connection between Myles Horton and Dr. Johnson's role in the field of adult education: 1) Who is Dr. Charles S. Johnson? 2) What was his role in race relations in the United States and particularly in the South? and 3) How did he influence the Civil Rights educational work at Highlander?

Findings

The answers to these questions are thought provoking. Fisk University and Highlander are about 200 miles apart in Tennessee. At Fisk, Dr. Johnson established an "internationally known Department of Race Relations [where] he pioneered the first Race Relations Institute in the South" (Gilpin & Gasman, 2003, p. 8). By 1922, "Johnson had gained a national reputation in the field of race relations" (Gilpin & Gasman, 2003, p. 6). Based on my research, Dr. Johnson's work is unknown within the field of adult education. However, his influence on Highlander and by extension the field of adult education is a story of silence that needs to be broken.

"Myles Horton [was] a good friend of Johnson's and a founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, a labor-affiliated interracial training center and encampment where Martin Luther King lectured and Rosa Parks learned the doctrine of nonviolent direct action before

boarding the bus in Montgomery” (Robbins, 1996, p. 154). It is interesting that as a white woman, what I remember from my doctoral classes was that King and Rosa Parks attended Highlander as adult learners. However, as Robbins (1996) points out Dr. King lectured at Highlander. Also Horton, Kohl and Kohl (1998) state, “Speaking at Highlander’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1957, less than two years after the movement got started, young Dr. King called on us to be ‘maladjusted” (p. 118). There is an enormous difference between being an educator and learner, even under the Highlander philosophy of trusting the learners to solve their problems. This raises an interesting question how I, as a white woman, even though I underlined that passage in the book relegated King and the role of other African Americans in the civil rights education that was occurring at Highlander as only receivers of knowledge rather than as creators. One might suppose that I unconsciously thought that at the time of Horton’s work at Highlander in a southern state during the 1950s and 1960s that it was prudent to minimize that aspect of African-Americans teaching Whites and Blacks together. However, that raises the question about why it took over ten years for me to see what was right in front of me.

Aimee Isgrig Horton notes in her book *The Highlander Folk School* (1989) that “correspondence between Charles Johnson and Myles Horton over the years indicates the deep regard of each for the other’s efforts” (p. 195). Perhaps we need to be bolder in telling the story of Highlander, not as a tribute to Myles Horton, but to look at the influences of others that shaped him and his work.

Conclusion

It is argued that while Myles Horton and his Highlander School has the reputation within adult education (Horton, Kohl & Kohl, 1998) for leading the way for racial integration in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, that Johnson’s work is the real foundation. His work especially at Fisk University, not only preceded Horton’s but Dr. Johnson was instrumental in the success of the adult education that occurred at Highlander.

In conclusion, these findings open up a number of discussions that need to occur within the field of adult education. What other untold stories wait to be discovered about the development of the field of adult education, especially in the social justice arena? Who has been left out because of lack of access to journals and publishers? Who else besides Myles Horton has failed to recognize the important work others, especially those who are marginalized by society, as they established their own story line and reputation in the field?

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