

# Narrating the Life of a Multiculturalist

## Marybeth Gasman's Refrain of Resilience

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### Introduction

This article is the first in a series of narrative studies of leaders in the field of multicultural education researched and written by Cheryl Hunter and several of her graduate students at the University of North Dakota. Other articles in the series will appear in future issues of *Multicultural Education*. Hunter and her students demonstrate how incorporating the personal narratives of prominent multiculturalists and practitioners with their scholarship helps us understand the depth of the scholar's writing, the complexities of such scholarship, and the passion surrounding both their work and their lived experience. The project of narrative inquiry combines qualitative research methods, including interviews, with multicultural education, thus producing a series of biographies that also provides us with a window into the history and development of multicultural education and its concepts. The first article in the series highlights the work and life of Marybeth Gasman and the impact she has made on multicultural education.

Throughout U.S. history, there have been periods of advancement in social equity followed by periods where hard-won gains have been lost. As we stand at the beginning of a new presidency in America, many are expressing concern that the American political dialogue displays a lack of cultural sensitivity. The pendulum of social equity appears to be poised to reverse as the U.S. enters a period where some gains in cultural inclusion and social advancement may be lost. President Trump has angered many by continuing to insist a wall will be built along the U.S.-Mexico border and by targeting legal non-residents from reentering the U.S. from Muslim-speaking countries (Levine, 2017; Rhodan, 2017; Rochabrun, 2017).

We use the concept of a pendulum swinging to represent what we have seen historically as both strides and setbacks to civil rights. As an example, the Civil Rights Movement did bring about significant changes regarding equality. In 1954, with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional. This ruling was intended to shepherd in equity and inclusivity to America's schools. However, *Brown* did not have the effect on equity and inclusion that some might have hoped for and much resistance emerged, such as Virginia's "Massive Resistance" laws of 1956 and the "Southern Manifesto."

The first major civil rights victory since Reconstruction occurred when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1957. But even with federal integration mandates in place, states continued to defy federal desegregation laws and on September 12, 1958, the Supreme Court again ruled; this time edifying the mandate of the Fourteenth Amendment. These examples of strides and setbacks reflect a constant movement,

both forward and back, to achieve civil rights and social justice.

As the pendulum swings forward and back, advocates in the fields of multicultural education have been sounding the alarm, calling America to action. Multicultural education is integral to improving the academic success of Students of Color and preparing all youth for democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society (Gay, 2003). Most recently the discourse around diversity has shifted. The 2016 presidential election highlights the alienation that a large portion of the U.S. society is feeling. The discourse of the presidential debates was troubling for many multicultural advocates not only for the overtly inhospitable tone towards Persons of Color, women, and immigrants, but because these messages were so commonplace, coming not only from solitary politicians but even more troubling, coming from leaders of political parties. As the election results came in, many found it alarming that the U.S. was so evenly and deeply split.

Now, more than ever, we need to understand the personal narratives of multicultural theorists, researchers, and authors as they have developed their theories and studies in multicultural education over time. We need to understand their own unique journey as they were working toward cultural equity, advocacy, and diversity in education. These personal narratives not only help us better understand the complexity and depth of their work but also serve as a reminder that a fair and equitable country where social justice and civil rights are a leading concern is still a goal worth fighting for.

### Narrative and Biographical Inquiry

Qualitative research can take many forms ranging from ethnography to case study. What characterizes narrative re-

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search, the form of research used in this study, is the use of a person's biography that "...revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (Chase, 2011, p. 421). When a story is examined as a whole, including the way it was structured and told, the researcher is able to view the story as a larger narrative piece and while doing so, the researcher is "...imposing meaning on participants' lived experience" (Bell, 2002, p. 210).

Thus, narrative inquiry involves a form of collaboration between the participant who shares her story and the researcher who interprets and retells the story. Clandinin and Caine (2008) argue that there are two ways in which narrative inquiry can begin: "listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants as they live their stories" (p. 543). The most widely used method is telling stories, often through interviews and conversations between participants and researcher (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). This is also the starting point used in the present study and these conversations enabled the researchers to ask Marybeth Gasman to share her own stories and experiences.

In this and subsequent articles in this series the individual's research area is understood in the context of his/her own biography (personal narrative). We use narrative inquiry as a more holistic approach to understand the person as the concern is "...with the relationships among the different parts of the transcripts or field notes, rather than fragmenting these and sorting the data into categories" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). This results in a narrative construct where the personal story is connected with the subject's own research and work.

By blending these two parts it is possible to "...create spaces in the story that provide room for theory and data to be connected to the participants' experiences" (Block & Weatherford, 2013, p. 503). In the end, if we are to fully understand the issues scholars like Marybeth Gasman have researched and worked with, we need to understand the lives and experiences that have influenced and shaped their work (Larson, 1997).

### **Marybeth Gasman's Refrain of Resilience**

Out of negative racist attitudes prevalent among White Americans arose many reformists at different times who sought to bridge the Black-White racial gap in some way. Among such reformers is Professor Marybeth Gasman. When it comes to racial equity and the demolition of walls of racial



*Marybeth Gasman*

prejudice, Gasman stands out as a champion. She demonstrates a strong passion for the wellbeing of African Americans. Many of her writings carry a common theme of building resiliency in our youth.

For example, in a 2003 study that looked at inner-city and art programs, Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins found that the positive effects of youth art programs were: (1) the programs promoted protective factors such as caring relationships with adults, resistance to negative peer pressure, and helped build self-esteem while fostering resiliency; (2) offered opportunities for youth to experience success, and provide opportunities for active-learning and skill building activities; and (3) art offers a way to explore difficult or complex issues with young people (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003).

Her research on resiliency comes from a narrative in which she has faced adversity, chosen to listen to voices of a counter-discourse, and sharply focused her efforts. It is this resilience in Gasman that gives us the impetus to write about her with excitement because we have much to learn from her about how to be resilient.

Gasman has spent much of her career researching minority serving institutions, particularly historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). She has delved into the ways that HBCUs have promoted teaching resiliency in students. The concept of resiliency comes through in many facets of her work and her collaborative work with others.

In a 2015 blog entry, Gasman discusses the evidence that exists that shows that HBCUs allow students to develop the majority of their identities and that they are engaged as whole persons rather than

as only Black students on predominantly White campuses. Gasman states, "This opportunity and engagement leads to increased self-confidence and a 'suit of armor' for pushing back against racism and discrimination when they attend graduate and professional school at majority institutions and operate in society" (Gasman, 2015, November).

HBCUs offer an environment many students need, a place that embraces Black culture and heritage without prejudice, and Gasman has committed her work to promoting building skills of resiliency in students that will help them withstand prejudice, allowing them to grow as thoughtful and empowered citizens. This theme recurs throughout her work.

In another example, Gasman, Spencer, and Orphan (2015) delved into civic engagement and how it is represented in HBCUs and historically White institutions. The authors point to the deep root of civic engagement in HBCUs, yet while making the case that HBCUs have been civically engaged, it is clear that resiliency is another aspect of what has been taught. The authors point out:

Black colleges' students, faculty, and staff historically have played significant roles in local communities in terms of providing health, literacy, voting, education, and gathering space. Many of these roles were risky given the oppressive Jim Crow South, while others were entrepreneurial in nature. In addition, black college students and faculty as well as some administrators fought vehemently for civil rights and registered African Americans to vote. (Gasman, Spencer & Orphan, 2015, p.377)

Resiliency has been taught since the beginning of HBCUs and is at the core of their existence. Local community and human needs were served by HBCUs:

Unlike the majority of other colleges and universities, HBCUs have a long and rich history of sponsoring "solutions to community problems" and responding to human needs that clearly sets them apart. In the most practical sense, civic engagement at black colleges developed critical thinking and problem solving skills on the part of students. (Gasman, Spencer & Orphan, 2015, p.378)

The authors found that while colleges across the country are adding civic engagement programs and quantifying participation, HBCUs have largely been left out of the research. In fact, they found only six articles out of hundreds on college civic engagement that pertained to HBCUs.

However, the authors found a recurring theme within the literature; that even though HBCUs have been largely ignored by researchers they point out that:

While historically white institutions have experienced a fairly recent resurgence of interest in developing the civic learning outcomes of students and creating strong, mutually beneficial bonds with their communities, HBCUs were founded with and, in many cases, have maintained these purposes throughout their histories. (Gasman, Spencer & Orphan, 2015, p. 348)

HBCUs have a rich history of civic engagement that is inherent, rather than chosen, in their missions (Gasman, Spencer & Orphan, 2015).

Gasman has demonstrated a strong passion for examining philanthropic activities, particularly relating to minority-serving institutions. Her determination in illuminating the hidden truth of the history of minority populations, especially in the context of higher education, is evidenced in her vast writings. For example, when Gasman (2012) reviewed the history of philanthropy in the United States related to educational institutions she found that conditional gifts of the industrial donors, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Julius Rosenwald intervened in the curricula of the schools to which they gave and were often not interested in elevating Blacks and the poor from the lower rungs of society. Gasman cautions in reporting this that while the philanthropists of the past focused more on institution building, today's philanthropists are backing bold entrepreneurial initiatives that are striving for broad-based educational reform, and they are doing this at the state and federal level (Gasman, 2012).

Rather than merely critiquing educational philanthropists, a better strategy is to work with them, educating them on what leads to student success. As we all strategize for the future of American education, we must remember that this is not about us, but about our children and those of our neighbor's. In our efforts, we must always remember to listen to the voice and perspectives of these children and their communities. (Gasman, 2012, May)

She concludes that the substantial influence these philanthropists have is an opportunity that educators, schools, and education scholars can leverage.

Underlying her research agenda and significant contributions briefly mentioned above lies a refrain of resilience that can be seen connecting with her personal bi-

ography and her attention to social justice in her work.

### In the Face of Adversity

Resilience can be defined as the process of facing adversity and not only overcoming, but also emerging with increased strength and resources (Walsh, 2003). Such resiliency has marked Gasman's life story. She grew up in a predominantly White community permeated with racism, yet chose a career that stands directly at odds with her upbringing. Gasman grew up in Michigan, surrounded by acute racism both at home and in school (blog, 2012). Her ardently racist father taught her and her siblings hatred for Black people, although he himself had never met people of color. He would continually blame Black people for his failures in life. Gasman (2011) writes:

I grew up in an all-White rural community in Michigan in which people, including my own father, perpetuated stereotypes about African-Americans daily. When I was young, I was told that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a terrorist and a rabble-rouser that slaves were happy in the fields and countless other lies.

This particular view toward African-American's at Gasman's home was compounded in the predominantly White school she attended. At her grade school, her teachers simulated a slave auction. Gasman explained that her social studies teacher narrated stories on slavery but never mentioned at any time the horrors of slavery, instead using images of happy slaves to convince the students that slavery was a good practice.

These particular experiences Gasman faced early in her life provided her a greater understanding in her future career, as she explained in an interview. "I understand American racism because I grew up with my dad who was an intensive racist. He didn't just focus on individuals. I think he would have supported systemic racism... and this shaped the majority of work that I have done." In the face of adversity in younger life, being faced with racist views in both the home and school, Gasman developed a particular world-view that she has carried on into her career.

I will say that the biggest experience is that I grew up in a home with a very racist father, and even though he had never met any man who was black, he held a lot of racial stereotypes and had a lot of hatred in his heart toward others. Mainly because he was very unhappy with his own life and

he was looking for a scapegoat to blame, so I grew up in a home where I saw racism on a daily basis. (Gasman Interview)

Despite growing up in an environment that was hostile toward People of Color, Gasman grew into a career that focuses on fighting racism, fostering racial equality, and protecting minority groups, particularly the African-American population. Instead of letting her growing-up years define her future outlook, Gasman remained resilient against the views and voices of racism and affirms that such ideologies stood in contrast to her sense of right and wrong.

One reporter, Nealy, (2010) writes of Gasman:

People are surprised, and not always pleasantly so, to discover that Dr. Marybeth Gasman, one of the leading scholars on historically Black colleges and universities, is White. When she was a graduate student, one professor tried to steer her away from the topic, advising her that research of this nature would be 'ghettoized'. He couldn't have been more wrong. (para. 1)

Gasman says, "That one faculty specifically told me that this was the wrong way to go and I moved away from that faculty member." Attempts by her graduate school professor to deter her by sowing fear of "ghettoization" through a career he considered "strange for a White lady" did not prevent Gasman from pursuing her dream. Gasman's resilience is clear as she made the choice to move away from that professor, choosing to pursue her dream, and today she is a phenomenal leading authority on HBCUs and an historian of higher education.

### Counter-Narratives

Notwithstanding the fact that Gasman grew up in a home where she saw racism on a daily basis, she decided to push back rather than embrace it. Unlike her father, Gasman's mother did not hold such beliefs.

I was lucky that my mother was very open-minded and she encouraged me not to pay attention to my father. So that experience kind of shaped the way that I thought, and I knew that there was something wrong with my father for thinking in such a way. I didn't want to be that way and I became very justice oriented because of that experience. (Gasman Interview)

Rather than embrace the beliefs system of her father, Gasman took the initiative to learn more about the African American culture on her own. She states:

In college and graduate school, I did a tremendous amount of reading and really acclimated myself to the African American culture and also various African Diasporas. So that helped to really shape the way that I taught as well, and I read a lot of different authors including fictions and poetries, just really trying to change the upbringing that I had. (Gasman Interview)

As Dr. Gasman read books to understand more about the African American culture, she states that James Anderson's book titled, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, was like a miracle to her in transforming her perceptions about People of Color. In an interview with Gasman, she explained:

Dr. James Anderson's book really had a significant impact in my life and affected change in my whole life and my career. I will say that I saw the hatred in my father, and that is not what I saw in reading James Anderson's book. I rather saw an impressive story about the African Americans agency and activism, and I saw how Dr. Anderson explained a complex story whereas my dad just painted a story of hatred. (Gasman Interview)

Anderson's book helped Gasman to unlearn the wrong notions that she had learned during her upbringing and instead she become more resilient to stand in the gap for Blacks, even with the challenge of being a White woman. Negative home and societal influence did not succeed in remolding Gasman into a racist.

Gasman's career choice has amazed many people over the years. Gasman (2011) testifies in a blog post on what revolutionized her perspective on Black people and mentions a question she is asked at least once a week. This two-fold question is "How did you get interested in doing research related to HBCUs?" And "Why are you so passionate about African-American education?" Gasman responds to these questions by alluding to the book by Anderson, which was assigned to her by John Thelin, a prominent historian of higher education, while taking a class on the "History of Higher Education and Philanthropy."

"It was this book", Gasman says, "that forever changed my career perspective and ignited an interest in African-American history that grew stronger with time". As Gasman testifies, Anderson's handling of African-American history was unlike what she had been previously exposed to. He portrayed blacks as proactive leaders instead of just victims of racism and relegation or suppression.

"In reading James Anderson's book, I rather saw an impressive story about the African Americans' agency and activism, and I saw how he explained a complex story whereas my dad just painted a story of hatred," she reports. Since reading Anderson, Gasman felt cheated by her prior education, she writes, and devoured any other book she found that dealt with African-American history. And she says "I was literally angry with my teachers at previous schools who had been biased in their presentation of American history and who had hidden from me the true picture of African-American history." From this point, she took it upon herself to study African-American history.

### **Focusing Her Efforts**

Gasman (2015) has mostly focused her work in two main areas. This is her academic secret that gives her the ability to excel in her career.

There is a secret academically, which is what I do. I pretty much stick to doing research in one area ... and I do not wander too far away from my center. So I do research related to minority serving institutions and I do some research relating to fund raising and philanthropy, and those two things completely overlap as well. And I kind of stick to that. So I am not trying to do research on everything. I have...a core knowledge and I stay around that area, but I don't try to be everything to everyone. (Gasman Interview)

Through her focus on researching HBCUs as well as conducting collaborative studies, her career has added significantly to the body of research on HBCUs. History, civic engagement (Gasman, Spencer, & Orphan, 2015), student success (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014), and the role and effects of HBCU philanthropy (Gasman, 2012, May) are her major research foci.

In a recent research study on Black student success, Gasman and Arroyo (2014) found that "the HBCU literature has developed for decades without the benefit of a single theoretical framework that is rooted in these schools and the work they do for black students." Wanting to instigate a line of theoretical research centered on black college student success, Gasman and Arroyo sought to synthesize the aggregate positive work of Black college students into a model for educators to consider in their approach to educating all students.

In 2012, Gasman and Hilton conducted a historical research study that examined legal and social forces that had an impact

on the development of HBCUs. They employed Derrick Bell's notion of interest convergence—that most Whites will only accommodate the interests of Blacks in achieving racial equality when it is in the best interest of White middle and upper classes. Gasman and Hilton found that "in all but a few cases, legal court decisions, laws, acts, and state and federal decisions as they pertain to HBCUs also had intentional or unintentional benefits for White students and historically White institutions" (2012, p. 1).

Gasman's persistence in research regarding People of Color has also reshaped many people's thinking about Black people. For example Gasman's dad, who was an intense racist and from whom she saw racism on a daily basis, changed as the years passed. Initially, when Gasman started her research on People of Color, her dad was very angry and thought that she had been misguided. Her dad was also very embarrassed that she chose such a path to dedicate her life. However, later in life, Gasman states:

My dad had a really great transformative experience, and that included the fact that when he was in a retirement home, he had an African American roommate, and as a result of having that roommate, his entire life kind of changed. Now, one thing I know about my dad is that he had never met any man black until he was old, and the first person he met was his roommate at the nursing home. Once he figured it out that people are people even though we have different skin color and different culture, or background that we actually have a lot in common and once he figured that out, he changed. (Gasman Interview)

In order to create an impact in our society, Gasman advises that people should live their lives for something larger than themselves. People should be motivated internally and not by external attention. Gasman says that "I think that far too many academics in particular are most elevated by awards and accolades, instead I think what they should be motivated by is making positive and substantial change and encouraging others to do the same."

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Gasman is a successful scholar, leader, teacher, mentor, administrator and parent. Despite a home life where racism was present, and a professional life where doubters questioned her place in the world of Black educators, Gasman has gained renown for her knowledge of minority-serving institutions, par-

ticularly HBCUs, as well as the history of HBCUs and the history and current place of educational philanthropy in the United States.

Gasman promotes the teaching of resiliency skills to Black and other minority students as a way to nurture youth to become stronger adults. Gasman's great success demonstrates that people can rise above the belief of their environment. Her great achievement attests to the power of hard work, dedication, confidence in her ideas, persistence to her work, belief in herself, and above all, the fact that she lives for something larger than herself.

Her writings on the need for building resiliency in children from inner-cities or other disadvantaged circumstances have added to the body of educational research to make her a strong and consistent voice for Children of Color.

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