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## Culture and Emotion: The Work of the Women of Highlander Center

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*Dominican Sisters of San Rafael*

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# **Culture and Emotion: The Work of the Women of Highlander Center**

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***Abstract:*** *The purpose of this study was to uncover the roles of the women of Highlander Research and Education Center. In this paper, I focus upon the influence of these women as cultural workers and caregivers. Robnett's (1997) concept of bridge leader provided the theoretical framework for data analysis.*

Highlander Research and Education Center was founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, Don West, Zilla Hawes and Jim Dombrowski. Their goal was to change the political and economic structure of the South through the education of activists and local community leaders. The history of Highlander is one of communities of women and men working together to achieve this goal. However, frequently in adult education research, Myles Horton is the focus of our study and is the central character in Highlander's narrative. We ignore the work of women and other men who contributed to Highlander's success and longevity. In this study, I analyze the work of women as cultural workers and caregivers at Highlander.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles of the women of Highlander and how these women influenced the curriculum and the institutional structure of Highlander. This study sought to determine the roles undertaken by women at Highlander and the ways in which these roles were gendered. For this paper, I will focus upon the roles and influence of women as cultural workers and caregivers. This is part of a larger study which was conducted in collaboration with Highlander staff to investigate the vision of and concern for social-change education of the women educators at Highlander. The study is guided by two questions:

1. How did women educators of Highlander use cultural tools to develop Highlander's educational methodology?
2. What was the contribution of women's emotional labor as caregivers to the development of Highlander's educational methodology and institutional structure?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is from Robnett (1997) who, after analyzing women's roles in the Civil Rights Movement, developed the concept of bridge leader in order to explain the critical role of women in the Civil Rights Movement which she suggests significantly contributed to the movement's success. Like women in the Civil Rights Movement, women's roles at Highlander are largely unknown and under analyzed. Robnett's findings suggest that analyzing the role of women at Highlander may contribute to our understanding of Highlander's history and its' educational and institutional structures.

## **Research Design**

This research stems from collaboration between me and the Highlander staff on a Highlander history project. In preparation to conduct interviews for this history project, I

reviewed past studies of Highlander and found that most of the literature did not discuss or analyze the work of the women of Highlander. After reviewing the findings of Robnett's (1997) investigation of the critical role of women in the Civil Rights Movement, I determined that a focus upon the role of the women of Highlander could be a fruitful and informative study. When I shared this interest with Williams and the current women staff at Highlander, they voiced excitement about a project which directly focuses upon the women of Highlander; therefore, I interviewed only women for my part of the history project.

In order to address the research questions a variety of data sources were collected and analyzed. Data sources included 30 in-depth interviews with Highlander's women educators and staff members, analysis of women's correspondence from the 1930s and 1940s, review and analysis of video and audio-taped workshops and examination of educational materials used in the workshops. The data were analyzed using an iterative process of continuous coding of interviews and analysis of educational materials.

## Findings

Music and cultural work are key components of Highlander's educational methodology. Frequently, this is attributed to Myles Horton; however, throughout Highlander's history, cultural work has fallen to women as well as to men. Zilphia Johnson Horton first shaped Highlander's cultural work by incorporating music, drama and art into Highlander's educational methodology. Since the arrival of Zilphia Johnson, women have been involved in the culture work of Highlander. They have incorporated cultural work into Highlander's educational method in order to build community, to energize workshop or picket line participants, to celebrate culture and to assist participants to analyze their problems through song, drama or other artistic venues. The use of culture is one of the unique aspects of Highlander's educational methodology. Women have been and continue to be important cultural workers at Highlander.

In addition to her cultural work, Zilphia Johnson Horton also exemplifies another women's role at Highlander. This role is that of the caregiver who provides for the physical and emotional needs of Highlander staff and workshop participants. The role of caregiver is a role unique to women in the history of Highlander. While men served alongside women as cultural workers, educators, researchers, advisers and directors, until very recently, only women undertook the role of caregiver at Highlander. Women's contributions through the role of caregiver were critical to its ability to hold residential workshops bringing together diverse peoples from many different settings and backgrounds as well as to its ability to continue to exist as an institution. Women as caregivers provided for the physical, emotional and financial needs of Highlander and Highlander's staff and workshop participants.

### *Cultural Work*

In 1935, Zilphia Johnson came to Highlander to attend a six-week labor workshop. She had just completed a degree in music and drama at College of the Ozarks. According to Charis Horton, her daughter, Zilphia was a classically trained musician. In *The Long Haul*, Myles Horton (1990) discusses the importance of music and culture in the methodology for his new mountain school. However, he also attests to the fact that neither he nor his friends who had come from Union Theological Seminary, knew any other kind of education other than a classical education. In those first years, sometimes they gave lectures on Socrates to farmers. Because Zilphia Johnson Horton was a trained musician, she was able to incorporate music and drama

into Highlander's educational methodology. She worked with labor leaders and union organizers to rewrite songs to teach about their situation. Departing from classical teaching, she used popular music, Broadway musicals, spirituals, and church music and helped labor leaders and workers to rewrite these. They sang these songs at Highlander workshops, at labor workshops off-site, and on picket lines. Donna Davis (a pseudonym) offered her analysis of Zilphia Johnson Horton's contributions to Highlander.

She really shifted the way she thought about music and culture and realized that she needed to learn more about the people's music and expression and culture.... She started learning some of the repertoire and songs. She turned her piano playing to the accordion that she could take with her out into the field or to union meetings or whatever. She worked on music and culture and theater at Highlander for about 20 years before she died in 1957, much too early.... This cultural piece, I think she recognized that it was one of the power builders that make people feel more powerful if you can tap into it ... That's the work that others who have done cultural work here have built upon.

In fact, the song "We Shall Overcome" comes from Highlander. It was brought to Highlander by textile workers who shared it with Zilphia Johnson Horton and other workshop participants. Zilphia Johnson Horton helped them to rewrite it, and verses were added for the next twenty years.

Culture work is a unique and crucial component of Highlander's educational methodology. Jane Sapp, a cultural worker at Highlander's for much of the 1980s, discussed her understanding of culture work and its importance to education and organizing. She began by describing her understanding of the role of the artist:

Your role, as an artist, was to be a kind of catalyst through which other kinds of things could happen. It was like, there were certain people who were good song leaders ... when they would stand up, when they would sound the song, you'd sort of say, "Oh, it here comes now. Get back." We're getting ready to have something. We're getting ready to have an experience that's really going to put us together; that's really going to bind our spirits; that's really going to make us feel like one; that's really going to have everybody shouting and it's really, in a sense, going to cleanse your soul and just make you feel real good. (Sapp, 1986)

She then went on to discuss what is required of a cultural worker:

There were so many things that you had to understand. You had to understand the group, you had to understand the community, you had to understand the traditions, you had to know enough about the group dynamics to know what people needed at that point in order to push them forward, again, to another level of coming together and being together....

Developing the creative and social and political potential of communities is indeed a lot of what I'm about ... my work has primarily been in the Deep South area. All of it has been looking at how you use culture as a means of helping people to understand what their realities

are. How do you handle those realities either in terms of changing them or adapting them, using them for your own social, cultural, economic and political development. (Sapp, 1986).

Although cultural work has been a part of Highlander's educational methodology since Zilphia Johnson Horton arrived at Highlander, different workshop directors have utilized cultural work in different ways. It was used for community building, entertainment, learning and analysis, and for tapping into cultural power.

They have incorporated cultural work into Highlander's educational method in order to build community, to energize workshop or picket line participants, to celebrate culture and to assist participants to analyze their problems through song, drama or other artistic venues. These quotes from Highlander's cultural workers reveal how cultural work is an integral part of the popular education methodology at Highlander. It is not seen as only entertainment but as a part of the popular education process itself. For many of the cultural workers, the goal was not only to incorporate culture into the educational methodology but also to help people to understand how to use culture as a tool for analysis and movement organizing in their communities after leaving Highlander. The use of culture is one of the unique aspects of Highlander's educational methodology. Women have been and continue to be integral cultural workers at Highlander.

### *Emotional Work: Caregiving*

The role of caregiver was first named and analyzed at the 1994 Women's Workshop in which women who had been on staff throughout Highlander's history came together to celebrate and name their contributions. The women in 1994 focused upon the women who provided for the physical and emotional needs of Highlander staff and workshop participants such as those women who were cooks, like Zilphia Johnson Horton, and the other women who welcomed newcomers by creating a hospitable atmosphere. I also include support staff in the caregiver category because through my interviews and analysis of the correspondence I found that one of the formal caregiver roles at Highlander was filled by support staff.

Prior to that workshop, the contribution of Highlander's cooks had not been analyzed. The Women's Workshop participants suggested that the cooks were the people who helped to lay the foundation of hospitality at Highlander. This was clearly illustrated by Dorothy (Nina) Reining's description of her responsibilities at Highlander.

We serve ordinary, home-cooked food. Make sure that there's plenty of it and treat people as you would treat your guests ... and we do a lot of things for you that's besides just feed you. I mean, if you need your pants sewed up, we'll lend you some thread, and that kind of thing.

Myles Horton (1991, 1996) frequently talked about how Black and White workshop participants came together at meals; they ate together, cooked together and cleaned together. Beginning in 1942, Highlander hosted workshops in which Black and White workers and labor leaders came together to learn, to eat, and to live together. For many, this was the first time that they had related with "the other". This was a profound experience for most. In fact, Rosa Parks said, "It was the first time in my life I had lived in an atmosphere of complete equality with members of the other race" (quoted in Glen, 1996, p. 162). She said that it was this experience that helped her to believe change was possible. Throughout Highlander's history, this work which laid the foundation for equality at Highlander was organized by women.

Those who had come to Highlander during the 1940s and 1950s said that Zilphia Johnson Horton was largely responsible for creating Highlander's hospitable environment. Anne Romasco, who first came to Highlander as an Antioch College intern spoke fondly of Zilphia Johnson Horton, remembering how she had helped Anne and all the interns to feel welcome. The women who gathered at the 1994 Women's Workshop also spoke of her hospitality and said how she helped them to feel comfortable in spite of being from many different backgrounds.

Charis Horton described her mother as creative and welcoming. She said that Zilphia Johnson Horton was the one who connected Highlander to the local community.

My mother always did a lot of work with the schools, with the local one-room school; so she'd put on these great big pageants and she made light things and did Christmas pageants; and so there was that sort of element which I was involved in.... she probably was the catalyst for a lot of the community connections just because of her personality and, you know, music stuff she was doing, and when she died there was nobody at Highlander that reached out to the community.

Since 1932, women have taken on the responsibility of creating a hospitable environment at Highlander. Susan Williams talked about how the women who helped her to feel comfortable at Highlander when she first went to workshop in 1977:

I think about Candy (Carawan) and Nina (Dorothy Reining). Candy because I always felt welcomed by Candy even though I did not know anybody. I had never been there before. I had no idea what I was doing. I always felt really welcomed by Candy. I have a strong memory of that and also because Candy was often the one who would encourage people to sing and be part of trying to pull people together. Nina, I remember because at that point, you washed dishes. The people in the workshop washed dishes so I washed dishes a lot because I had grown up washing dishes and it was something to do that was helpful that I could do. So I was in the kitchen all night.

These women's experiences illustrate the importance of hospitality and the ways in which women were the primary providers of hospitality at Highlander. Hospitality continues to be particularly important at Highlander because of the nature of workshops which require participants to share deeply from their personal experiences and they need to feel comfortable in order to do so. Susan Williams attests to the experience of coming in new without knowing anyone. Thus, hospitality facilitates the development of trust which provides the foundation of Highlander's educational process.

Women also worked as support staff at Highlander. They typed letters, tracked donors, organized the library along with a myriad of other duties which facilitated the efficient running of Highlander. Joyce Dukes was Myles Horton's secretary; she also became a workshop facilitator; working at Highlander for approximately 10 years in the late sixties and early seventies.

He (Myles Horton) asked me to come and work at his house to be his – well, I guess his assistant, in a lot of ways, I did a secretarial work when they entertained – got the food and did food preparation and so forth. I drove him a lot of times when – he was not a good driver. And we went to a number of places together, and... I was Myles support person. Typing, filing,

cataloguing, shopping, cooking, serving, and driving. The work of the women who were support staff served a critical function at Highlander. Support staff are included in this category because, in addition to supporting the physical and financial structures of Highlander, their tasks also included providing emotional support. The task of maintaining Highlander's financial support base which included developing and maintaining relationships with donors, research foundations and former and current workshop participants is just one example of how support staff included emotional care work. From the beginning, Highlander staff kept in touch with people from around the country who were interested in supporting Highlander both educationally and financially. Part of the reason that Highlander still operates today is due to this extensive correspondence which has created a considerable donor base. For much of Highlander's history, this task has fallen almost solely to the director and his support staff. In the last 20 years, however, this task has been taken on by Highlander's development director who works closely with the executive director in order to insure that Highlander has the necessary funds each year. Thus far, the development directors have been women.

The role of caregiver was a role unique to women in the history of Highlander. While men served alongside women as cultural workers, educators, researchers, advisers and directors, until very recently, only women undertook the role of caregiver at Highlander. Women's contributions through the role of caregiver were critical to its ability to hold residential workshops bringing together diverse peoples from many different settings and backgrounds as well as to its ability to continue to exist as an institution. Women as caregivers provided for the physical, emotional and financial needs of Highlander and Highlander's staff and workshop participants.

### **Significance**

The findings reveal previously unknown roles which supported Highlander's continued success and growth. While many social change organizations include teachers, advisers, directors and researchers in their structures, not many may understand the support that cultural workers and caregivers could provide. Much of the previous research of social movements has emphasized rationality and the role of the official (usually male) leader; however, this study demonstrates the ways in which organizations could benefit from the planned inclusion of positions which include caregiving and cultural work, thus supporting the building of community and support of community-based organizations. These findings could help social change organizations to identify who may already be supporting cultural work and providing caregiving in the organization. They could incorporate these functions and roles more formally into their organization structure and plan for their expansion to better meet the needs of their organization and its constituencies.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to our understanding of the history of Highlander by reframing the telling of the history from the "great man" story of Highlander to one which focuses upon the communities of women who shaped it as an institution and created its unique educational methodology. For adult education researchers, this means that we could benefit from further research of the influence of emotional and cultural work upon Highlander and within other adult education settings.

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