

The Ground on Which I Stand

Tamina, a Freedmen's Town




MARTI CORN

FOREWORD: STORIED LIVES

Tracy Xavia Karner

Ethnographer Ruth Behar calls herself a storyteller who has been seduced by the allure of fieldwork—by the beauty and the mysteries of the lives of others. Whether with audio recorder or camera, her desire is to “find the stories we didn’t know we were looking for in the first place.”¹ In *The Ground on Which I Stand*, Marti Corn has done just that. She found a story—or perhaps it might be more accurate to say the story found her—as she became aware of a neighboring community, Tamina, that had been isolated and rendered socially invisible for much of its existence. Curious about its history and cultural significance, Marti began her fieldwork like an ethnographer—getting to know the residents and participating in the community long before bringing her camera.

Freedmen’s settlements are a little known part of post-civil war history in Texas. History, the saying goes, is written by those in power. So, it is not surprising that we hear certain kinds of voices rather than others. The further back we go in the past, the smaller the proportion of people who could read, write, and record their history of those times. Additionally, only certain kinds of documents are preserved through time; others have either been thrown away, lost, burned accidentally or purposely, or in other ways rendered unavailable. Historians Thad Sitton and James Conrad speculate that illiteracy, as well as other disadvantages faced by blacks in Texas, are part of the reason we know so little about these communities. In their research, they spoke with a woman who had interviewed the elderly women of her freedmen town about their lives under slavery. She had recorded their stories on brown wrapping paper she kept under her bed.² In communities such as Tamina, stories and oral histories take on a central importance and become a bridge to the past when written documents are scarce or nonexistent.

The use of images, both still and moving, has long been used to document and understand communities. From the pencil sketches and watercolor drawings of pre-modern travelers to the photography used by early anthropologists, images have played an important role in conveying culture and experience. Anthropologist Robert Flaherty filmed Eskimos in the 1920s, while Margaret

Mead and Gregory Bateson filmed everyday life in Bali in the 1930s. Indeed, almost from its invention, photography has been used to document social life at home and abroad. The world that is seen through photographs or other images, visual sociologist Douglas Harper contends, is different than a world comprehended through words or numbers.³

Though Marti considers herself a documentary photographer, she has completed a more comprehensive portrait of a community. Beyond the compelling visual images, she includes interviews and historical pictures to offer the viewer an expanded look at this relatively unknown town. By collecting stories and taking photographs, Marti offers traces of both the residents of Tamina and the community. In her photographs, we meet “The Faces of Tamina” and with the interviews, we hear the residents’ voices. The photographs and stories document the qualities of social relationships, the fragility of community, and the sense of belonging to a place in ways outsiders may have never known. With her focus on storied lives and lived experiences, her work helps viewers transcend categories and stereotypes.

One of the most profound aspects of photography is its ability to evoke what neuroscientists call narrative empathy. Studies have found that any activity that encourages us to explore someone else’s perspective increases an empathic response. As human beings, we are hard-wired to respond to stories, because they ask us to imagine what it would be like to be someone else. Reading the stories of Tamina, we hear the individuals’ voices in our heads.

When we look at a portrait, our mirror neurons fire, calling forth a similar response in our brains to the pictured individual. Looking into the eyes of a person in a photograph can also bring about an oxytocin release, helping us to feel connected to the individual in the portrait. Marti’s direct and collaborative approach to image creation results in photographs that are as immediate and striking as they are accessible and engaging.

The stories we tell, whether in photographs or words, are embedded in a specific time, place, history, and culture—all of which help shape and form the narrative. As such, *The Ground on Which I Stand* is both the collective story of a community and individual stories of the residents. It is the story of a past and present with a glimpse of an uncertain future. By sharing their stories, the residents of Tamina are sharing the essence of their lives—what has happened to them, the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime. By doing so, they are also telling the story of their community, of their collective history, of their shared values and concerns. Their stories are like gifts, generously offered and respectfully documented by Marti. Tamina has opened her arms, and viewers are invited to imagine and understand their ways of being in the world.

Throughout history, stories have been used to teach, to entertain, to express, to advocate, and to organize meaning. It is through the sharing of stories that communities build their identities, pass on traditions, and construct meaning. We hear the sustaining narratives of church, family, and community in the stories of Tamina. In the photographs, we meet Reginald Chevalier proudly standing in front of the house he built himself, and we witness Johnny Jones in jubilant song; Ranson and Shirley Grimes relax on their porch, while choir director Ruth Watson gazes self assuredly at Marti's lens.

We see the trappings of rural poverty, remnants of racial discrimination, and the prevalence of horses in this still mostly pastoral community. In both the stories and the images, the importance of community is clear. Residents have relied on each other over the years and cared for each other through the generations. People talk of community as nearly synonymous with family. *The Ground on Which I Stand* shows a community that embodies the importance of social bonds and what it means to belong to a place.

Images, as well as stories, can provide a way to remember and retell experiences. *The Ground on Which I Stand* contributes to the historical record of freedmen's settlements in Texas, expanding our understanding of ourselves and our neighbors. This work stands as a testament to the significance of social connections in overcoming barriers and challenges—and to the strength and perseverance of individuals. Respectfully and faithfully documented, this work illustrates the integrity inherent in the collaborative processes of both photographers and ethnographers alike. Working with the residents of Tamina, Marti has helped them share and tell their stories to create a compelling portrait of a community that represents an important chapter in our history that should not be forgotten.

NOTES

1. Behar, Ruth. "Ethnography and the Book that was Lost," *Ethnography* 4(1): 15–39.
2. Sitton, Thad, and James H. Conrad with Richard Orton. *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.
3. Harper, Douglas. *Visual Sociology*. New York: Routledge, 2012.