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## Put Some Respect On Our Name: Why Every Black & Brown Girl Needs to Learn About Radical Feminist Leadership

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# Put Some Respect On Our Name: Why Every Black and Brown Girl Needs to Learn About Radical Feminist Leadership

*Bettina L. Love and Kristen Duncan*

The hashtag #SayHerName was spearheaded by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) to respond to the erasure of Black women and girls' experiences with police brutality and radicalized state violence. Kimberlé Crenshaw, co-founder and executive director of AAPF, argued that having an analytical understanding of gender-specific violence is necessary in order to start community conversations and policy initiatives. This premise can be applied to education, too.

Young girls of color need to be exposed to gender- and race-specific curricula that center their lives and tell the stories of women of color who have fought for liberation in a myriad of rebellious and subversive ways (Price-Dennis, 2016; Haddix, McArthur, Muhammad, Price-Dennis, & Sealey-Ruiz, 2016; McArthur, 2016; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). This essay argues for exposing Black and Brown girls not only to women of color who were freedom fighters, but to the radical feminist leadership approaches that guided these women's work. Radical feminist leadership is invested in sustainable civil rights organizing and is concerned with collective power and democratic forms of shared leadership.

## **Our Work Speaks For Itself, If You Listen**

In 2020, for the first time in its history, the United States of America will put a woman on its paper currency: abolitionist Harriet Tubman. When the change occurs, Tubman will finally be introduced to millions of Brown and Black girls as an important figure in American history, a leader in America's quest to form a more perfect union. But as what kind of leader will teachers depict her? Visibility does not equal power.

It remains to be seen whether teachers will honor Tubman and the countless women of color (e.g., Mary McLeod Bethune, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Diane Nash, Daisy Bates, Dorothy Height, Carmen Abrego, Fannie Lou Hamer, Josefina Fierro de Bright, Dolores Huerta, Cathy Cohen,

Septima Clark) whose radical feminist leadership focused on community uplift, love, and helping everyday people understand the social, political, and economic contexts of their oppression. If the conversation concerning Tubman does not reflect the totality of her life and is not deliberately presented to young girls of color as a model of their intellectual capacity, their creativity for doing what is deemed impossible, their duty to be civic agents, and, ultimately, their collective liberation, her visibility in the classroom will be as flat as her image on the \$20 bill.

It is well known that Tubman, as a conductor of the Underground Railroad, returned to the South to safely lead enslaved Blacks north to free states. However, she was also a Union spy with the strategic skills to run a special operations unit:

... A nine-man spy unit comprising local black riverboat pilots who knew the waterways well and taught them how to collect intelligence. They scouted for the Union, mapping the islands and shores of South Carolina and providing information about the location of Confederate sentinels. (Lamothe, 2016, para. 6)

### **Society typically portrays Tubman as courageous, but not as a mastermind and a leader of men.**

One of the most prolific, courageous, intellectually acute political organizers for social change of all time is Ella Baker, though her work is rarely discussed in schools. She worked from the premise that “Strong people don’t need strong leaders” (Ransby, 2003). Baker was critical of charismatic male leaders, or the singular charismatic leader who did not empower people with the tools to transform their lived conditions. Baker was just as important to the Civil Rights Movement as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She, unlike King, believed in the power of oppressed people and communities to create pathways to leadership that were decentralized and non-hierarchical. She wanted people to understand just how strong and brilliant they were, both individually and collectively. Baker was driven by the idea of a radical democratic practice where the oppressed, excluded, and powerless became active in positions of power with decision-making opportunities (Ransby, 2003).

### **The Need for Fuller Stories**

Girls of color often experience social, emotional, psychological, and physical violence inside and outside of schools. They need more than just the counter-narratives that highlight women of color

deemed successful by American standards of exceptionalism and meritocracy. Brown and Black girls need to be equipped with radical feminist leadership models that highlight activism and strategizing for collective liberation, and that exclude no one.

Black Lives Matter is a contemporary model of Ella Baker's philosophy of a leaderful movement led by women of color strategists and organizers. These leaders' ideas, if not their physical bodies, should permeate classrooms concerned with the lives of Black and Brown girls, instead of purely focusing on the negative portrayal of how bad their lives are. In short, these girls need a curriculum concerned with engaging young women of color in a leadership model that will #SayHerName.

From a feminist leadership perspective, activism is at the center of teaching and learning. The idea of activism is foundational to girls of color because they need to know that they have the power to change their communities as leaders. Merely exposing young girls of color to Black and Brown women who have managed to become successful by the standards of American meritocracy is futile. In fact, doing so without including the herstories that demonstrate Black and Brown women's type of leadership and activism upholds patriarchy by teaching all students, especially young girls of color, that only male leadership models can create change.

## **Practical Examples**

Teaching students about radical feminist leadership needs a curriculum that centers women as historical actors, not passive participants in history. When we teach about the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is usually referenced as someone who went out and took action. Rosa Parks, on the other hand, is frequently positioned as a woman who only refused to give up her seat on that Montgomery bus because she was tired. Rosa Parks was actually a trained civil rights activist who knew exactly what she was going to do when she stepped on that bus on December 1, 1955, and what the consequences would be.

Additionally, the ensuing Montgomery bus boycott was planned and orchestrated by the Women's Political Council, an organization of Black women led by JoAnn Gibson Robinson, not King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Robinson & Garrow, 1987). Teaching the complete picture, which includes women taking leadership roles, engaging in civic agency, and empowering their community members helps students understand that the Montgomery bus boycott and other historical events simply would not have happened without women and their focus on community uplift.

Another approach is to talk to local women of color, helping students learn how these women have organized and led efforts for change in their own communities. Whether it is Aurielle Lucier in Atlanta, Charlene Carruthers in Chicago, Alicia Garza in Oakland, or Luba Cortes in New York City, few things could help students understand radical feminist leadership better than learning about the ways women are working to make their communities better. An added bonus to focusing on women in the local community is that it allows students to hear about their endeavors directly from the source.

There are also free online curricula for teachers. For example, Get Free (Getfreehipopcivics.com) is a multimedia hip-hop civics curriculum for youth and young adults. Its goal is to introduce young people and educators to a national network of young community leaders, artists, and activists who advocate for social change and democratic inclusion driven by grassroots organizing. The site focuses on exposing youth to radical feminist leadership models and individuals. Lastly, a #SayHerName syllabus is available online (<http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/sayhername/>).

We hope these resources are helpful as we all uplift and honor the lives and ideas of women of color. Putting some respect on the names of women of color is not just honoring women of color, but laying the foundation for young girls to resist and lead. The playbook that was been created and left for girls of color is robust, malleable, and proven to be successful in the fight for justice—a fight that will never be won without women and girls of color in leadership positions.

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