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Black Girls Are More Than Magic

Gloria J. Ladson-Billings
University of Wisconsin

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Black Girls Are More Than Magic

Gloria Ladson-Billings

I began my public school teaching career with middle-grade students in the city of Philadelphia. My assignment was to teach social studies, and my area of specialty was U.S. history. I reconceived the course by beginning with the civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer and accompanied it with the question, “Does the U.S. form of democracy work for this woman?” My rationale for using Fannie Lou Hamer had to do with the way she symbolizes the complexities of race, class, and gender.

A voting rights activist in Mississippi and a member of the Freedom Democrats, Mrs. Hamer contested the Democrats sending an all-white delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention. After bringing national attention to the situation of Blacks in Mississippi, she and other members of the Freedom Democrats were invited to speak to the Democrats’ Credentials Committee.

When I first saw Mrs. Hamer on my television screen in 1964 she was declaring herself to be a “democratically elected delegate” to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. At that moment, I recognized that Mrs. Hamer was simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. She was “regular” and she was magic.

I recognized her as ordinary or “regular” because she looked exactly like so many Black women who were a part of my growing up. Sitting before the Democrats’ Credentials Committee in a matronly, flowered dress with her hair “hard pressed” and curled, Mrs. Hamer looked exactly like women I regularly saw in my neighborhood, at my church, or showing up at school to plead for another chance for one of their children. She reminded me of my grandfather’s sister, my great aunt Dolly, who, although she lived in Brooklyn for many years, maintained what I would call her “Southern ways.”

Fannie Lou Hamer was the emblem of the tens of thousands of Black women who worked hard to raise and protect their families, but who were not to be trifled with. Despite their very ordinary countenances, in the face of threat to their loved ones or blatant injustice, they could become quite extraordinary. They could be magic.

Fannie Lou Hamer’s magic was the powerful and precise way she stated her case before the entire nation. Her presence was so commanding that President Lyndon Johnson called an impromptu press conference to divert the national media from her testimony. But it was too late. She had worked her magic—her Black girl magic. Mrs. Hamer demonstrated that a woman did not need to be young, thin, rich, or White to captivate the nation. She had to have integrity, truth, and justice on her side.

I am dismayed by how many of my university students have never heard of Fannie Lou Hamer, but I am not surprised. Black girls and women are rarely featured in the narrative of U.S. history. When pressed to name “famous” Black women who are not artists or entertainers, most students settle on Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King. More recently Michelle Obama has been added to the list. But few students know of Harriet Jacobs, Biddy Mason, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Coppin, Mary Church Terrell, Dorothy Height, or countless others. The recent release of the Hollywood film *Hidden Figures* (Chernin, Topping, Gigliotti, Williams, & Melfi, 2016) tells the story of three Black women mathematicians—Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, and Mary Jackson—who, along with Christine Darden, began working for NASA in the 1950s and charted the launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit around the earth (Shetterly, 2016).

I highlight these women because they stand in stark contrast to the way Black girls and women are generally portrayed both in our popular culture and in schools. Discussions about race tend to center on Black boys and men. Discussions about gender focus on White women (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1993). However, some scholars are beginning to pay attention to the plight of Black girls and women both in schools and in the community.

Morris (2016) documented the increasing numbers of suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile detentions that Black girls experience. Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, and Harris (2016) called attention to the way Black women’s brutalization and victimization by the police is rendered invisible by most media outlets. Thus, while most people know the names of Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, the names of Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, and Mya Hall go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Today, celebrities like Beyoncé, Rihanna, Alicia Keys, and Mariah Carey are lauded for their “Black Girl Magic.” But what they do is not “magical.” They work hard, they go up against White celebrities, and they allow their talent to shine through. “Magic” for Black women is the ability to feed families, keep roofs over their children’s heads, and maintain dignity in the face of a society that despises them

for both their race and their gender. Magic is the ability to persevere despite being rendered invisible. Magic is setting your own standard of beauty while every representation of beauty displayed to you from the time you are a little girl is the antithesis of your skin color, your size, your hair texture, your nose, your lips, and your hips.

Black girls are so much more than magic. They are strong. They are smart. They are brave. They are resilient. They are capable. They are so much more than what society claims they are. They are responsible for almost every civil rights movement that tackles racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ability discrimination. What makes them more than magic is that they have not allowed all of the things they are up against to deter them from continuing the fight for justice and right. Instead of being ignored or despised by society they should be venerated. Programs like Black Entertainment Television's (BET) "Black Girls Rock" pay tribute to both the famous and the ordinary to remind us that we are more than magic. But Black girls are smart enough not to wait for external celebrations of who they are. Instead, they continue to be themselves and to make the world believe they are more than magic!

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Gloria Ladson-Billings is the Kellner Family professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A pedagogical theorist, her research examines socio-cultural issues in classrooms and teaching from a stance that recognizes the power of culture as a means for supporting the education of all children. She is also best known for coining the term culturally relevant pedagogy. Her work examines the role of critical race theory in education. Ladson-Billings has won numerous awards for her work, of which include the Romnes Faculty Fellowship, the Spencer Post-doctoral Fellowship, and the Palmer O. Johnson outstanding research award.