BRIDGING THE GAP: BLACK WOMEN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Most Americans understand the civil rights movement through a lens of collective efforts yielding a positive outcome for all African Americans. In reality, much of the Black community was excluded from both the objectives and public image of the main civil rights movement. As scholars continue to unearth Black women's contributions to the civil rights movement, it becomes apparent that Black women strategically maneuvered the organizational structure to best serve all Black people. My paper draws on Belinda Robnett's bridge leadership theory to analyze various speeches and initiatives by three Black women in the civil rights movement—Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker— exploring how Black women leveraged their positionality within the movement to include and uplift the entire Black community.

To be Black in America means to live under an oppressive system built to disenfranchise and hinder the progress of the Black race in the United States. To be a woman in America means to live under a patriarchy that values the lives of men far more than the lives of women. To be a Black woman in America means to embody both of these identities to the extent that their experiences are so misunderstood, they are often erased from the consciousness of all other groups. Yet, even after centuries of disenfranchisement and even being left behind by their own people, Black women have always been and continue to be at the forefront of both racial equality and feminist movements.

The most commemorated figures of the civil rights movement in the United States include people such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Congressman John Lewis, and other widely respected Black men. Most White Americans only saw these prominent men of the movement, who, despite their notoriety as activists, actually maintained a more traditional approach to advancing the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was heavily based in the Christian Church and relied on a strategy of respectability in order to gain support from White Americans and the more conservative political sector. This meant that many Black Americans did not fit into the image that the dominant movement was determined to project. Low-income, uneducated, and non-religious Black people all fell into categories of Black people whose needs were not represented in the dominant civil rights movement. A

disconnect existed between the collective public and localized private spheres of Black communities that needed to be addressed in order for the civil rights movement to better meet the needs of *all* Black Americans, rather than only a select few.

Black women, in part due to their long history of activism within both African American and women's freedom movements, were well equipped to fill the detrimental gap between Black community members and civil rights leaders. Black women's intentional strategies within the civil rights movement positioned them so that their work and leadership were rarely formally recognized, yet nonetheless critical to the advancement and maintenance of the movement (Brooks; Brown; DeLaure; Ford). The strategies Black women employed during the civil rights movement involved taking on the role of bridge leaders who were responsible for connecting the formal leaders to the Black population at large. Black women's intersectional identities allowed them to better understand the needs of the Black community that the formal leaders were not attuned to or concerned with.

Bridge leadership, a theory coined by Belinda Robnett in her book, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, describes those who connect formal leadership to the general public through acting as a formal leader without actually being a formal leader. When compared with formal leaders of social movements who "possess institutional and organizational power . . . bridge leaders make similar decisions except that their organizational mobilization skills are performed within . . . a 'free space' . . . that is not directly controlled by formal leaders or those in their inner circle" (Robnett 21). Bridge leaders in the civil rights movement were critical in laying the foundational infrastructure for several of the most prominent civil rights organizations, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and many others. In this paper, I argue that Black women intentionally positioned themselves in less public places within the civil rights movement as a way to engage in non-traditional rhetoric for the time. To illustrate, I will analyze different strategies within the framework of bridge leadership that highlight the significance of Black women's positionality within the movement.

OBJECTS OF ANALYSIS

The objects I analyze to make my argument about women's strategies in the civil rights movement include speeches and civil rights curriculum content. When researching the topic of women's impact on the civil rights movement, I read many speeches to guide my search for objects of analysis. Speeches are generally a very explicit form of rhetoric and activism, oftentimes addressing a large audience and made available to the public. Additionally, speeches are extremely tied to the speaker both physically and in the audience's mind's eye. The saying "actions speak louder than words" rings true in the name of activism; the speeches make declarations and express hopes for the movement's future. However, the true driving force of

social movements lies in the ability of activists themselves to simultaneously take tangible actions while inciting a large number of people to take part in the mission. In this vein, I attempt to analyze not only impactful speeches made by Black women in the civil rights movement but also the actions and strategies that Black women used that distinguished their activism from their male counterparts.

First, I will analyze various documents relating to the Citizenship Education Program under the SCLC, including a Citizenship School Workbook ("SCLC Citizenship"), Citizenship Training Workshop schedule ("Citizenship Training"), and an essay by Citizenship Education Program Field Organizer, Annell Ponder. Septima Clark spearheaded the Citizenship Education Program, making evident her belief in empowering underrepresented Black communities during the civil rights movement. The Citizenship School Workbook is an embodiment of Clark's vision and is tangible evidence of women's impact on the civil rights movement. The Workbook emphasizes the long-term goals of the Citizenship Education Program initiative and is reminiscent of other women's ideologies within the civil rights movement. The other documents I analyze are evidence of women's dedication to the program in contrast to male leaders' involvement in the Citizenship Education Program.

I will also analyze several of Fannie Lou Hamer's speeches, specifically some of her less popular speeches. One of Hamer's speeches, "We're on our Way," was given in 1964 at the Negro Baptist School in Indianola, Mississippi. Indianola is the same place where only two years prior to this speech, Hamer and a group of Black activists attempted to register to vote. Starting during this particular endeavor, Hamer built a reputation for singing and implementing musicality within her activism. In fact, some scholars analyze Hamer's speech within the framework of a piece of music; see, for example, Julia Cox's exploration of "how Hamer employed vernacular traditions and revised gendered oratorical practices to stage a 'protest song' in her speech about black voting rights at the 1964 DNC" (140). Other speeches by Hamer that I will analyze or discuss are "I Don't Mind My Light Shining" (1963), "Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration" (1965), and "The Only Thing We Can Do Is to Work Together" (1967). Hamer's unique style of activism and speech makes her an enticing subject of study within the scope of Black women's rhetoric in the civil rights movement. In each of her speeches, Hamer expertly manipulates her rhetoric to the specific audience and occasion, making her speeches a fundamental building block in the analysis of Black women's activism in the civil rights movement.

Lastly, I will analyze Ella Baker's address at Hattiesburg (January 21, 1964), which gives insight into Baker's core tenets of activism and civil rights. The address took place the night before a Freedom Day, "events organized by civil rights groups to encourage black voter registration," to an audience of majority local Black residents from in and around Hattiesburg, MS (Orth 32). Most notably, Baker's insistence on grassroots activism is evident through her call

for the audience to "see this thing in its larger perspective" rather than focusing only on the singular goal of the Freedom Day event, which was voter registration. Baker expresses her vision for African American freedom while utilizing various rhetorical strategies to convince her audience of her vision.

UNEARTHING WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

As mentioned earlier, the women of the civil rights movement are much less talked about or commemorated than their male counterparts. This ideal is evident in academic research focused on the women of the civil rights movement. Fortunately, more and more scholars are tackling the subject and have produced several prominent observations regarding women of the civil rights movement. Laura Michael Brown aptly characterizes *why* erasure of Black women's contributions to the civil rights movement was so prevalent, especially during the movement, stating that "the internal process of negotiating difference within an organization or group often conflicts with the need to project a unified version of a 'self' to those on the outside" (60). Brown's stance encapsulates the nuanced labyrinth of the civil rights movement, especially from the perspective of Black women, who had to carve out their place within racial, class, and gender dynamics whilst simultaneously breaking these existing dynamics for the sake of pushing social change. Black women achieved this feat in various ways.

Many scholars, including Tanisha C. Ford, Tomiko Brown-Nagin, and Belinda Robnett, take the stance that Black women activists utilized communal-based strategies that involved including Black members of the community at large. Ford's article delves into how Black women used clothing as a form of politics and resistance during the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically, Ford analyzes how young Black women initially refused traditional, respectable clothing and hairstyles for the sake of functionality but eventually deemed this clothing style as a "uniform" of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (626). Ford's analysis unearths a turning point in women's activism in the civil rights movement, specifically observing how this type of activism pushed them away from the traditional church *status quo* that dominated the civil rights movement. An understanding of respectability politics and how Black women approached respectability politics is key to a thorough analysis of the civil rights movement. According to Fredrick Harris, "Politics of respectability has mass appeal" across social classes, especially amongst Black communities (34), which emphasizes how outwardly contradicting this ideology is striking and powerful. Ella Baker was an advocate of the SNCC members wearing a denim uniform as a form of identification and resistance. According to Ford, this plays into her approach as a successful activist and is telling of her deep understanding of both Black and White audiences of the civil rights movement.

In conjunction with Ford's understanding of Baker's positionality in the civil rights movement, Marilyn Bordwell DeLaure paints a picture of Ella Baker as a form of rhetoric in herself because of how her activism empowered

others to participate in the movement. DeLaure explores how the rhetoric of female activists is consistently overlooked in favor of more popular male figures, illustrating specific moments in Baker's career, such as when Martin Luther King did not consider her the legitimate director of the SCLC – even though she most definitely performed the role to the fullest extent. Baker notoriously encouraged student activists to remain independent from the SCLC and the more dominant and traditional movement. This plays into the overall rhetoric of her activism, which emphasized grassroots, decentralized movements across the US. To fulfill her ideals involved a great amount of community organizing to cultivate successful leaders within local grassroots movements. Baker's accessibility resonated with local Black communities and distinguished her from other prominent civil rights leaders. DeLaure's ideas raise important markers of Ella Baker's rhetoric that resonated both with other female civil rights leaders and with broader organizations in which Ella Baker played a prominent role.

The rhetoric of specific activists is also a key investigation into understanding how Black women positioned themselves in the civil rights movement. Maegan Parker Brooks offers a rhetorical analysis of over a dozen of Fannie Lou Hamer's speeches, asserting that Hamer was extremely methodical in her activism and speeches. Hamer was able to build a recognizable and unique persona by using vernacular influenced by "cultural and counter institutional frameworks" (Brooks 523). She took on an authoritative voice that was able to initiate various calls to action. Although successful on many levels, one of the drawbacks of Hamer's strategy of vernacular personification was that her activism was not as widely publicized within the greater civil rights movement, which was very concerned with maintaining an image of respectability. Nevertheless, Hamer was able to transcend the myriad of silencing forces against her activism. Even though her name was not as recognizable to as many Americans as other civil rights leaders, the fact that her messages were critical and embedded in the civil rights movement proves that her rhetorical strategies held an undisputable power. Brooks's analysis is unique in its use of dozens of unpublished and/or under-studied speeches and writings by Hamer. Brooks's research expands further than most studies that focus on Hamer and subsequently brings a new lens by which to analyze Hamer's most famous and heavily analyzed speeches.

Although Black women's contributions to the civil rights movement continue to be unearthed and more widely known, the common thread through the existing literature is the way that Black women utilized their positionality within local and broader movements to contribute to their communities. My analysis builds off existing literature by applying the various methods and observations discussed into a synthesis of how Black women engaged within the civil rights movement drawing on the theory of bridge leadership.

BRIDGE LEADERSHIP

Bridge leadership is one of the most tangible forms of activism that differentiates Black women from their male counterparts in the

civil rights movement. As discussed earlier, bridge leadership involves acting as a mediator between the formal movement leadership and local communities. Within the civil rights movement, Black women tactfully positioned themselves into this role because they understood that their skills and abilities were most suited for this role within the broader existing framework of the civil rights movement. I am not asserting that women were or are not capable of being formal and principal leaders of freedom movements, but that Black women recognized that given the limitations of power within the patriarchal system they were more likely to achieve their goals and to progress the movement from a position of bridge leadership. Moreover, women perceived the gap that men and other formal leaders failed to fill within the movement and subsequently acknowledged that a bridge between local Black communities and the public movement was a critical element in fostering a more inclusive freedom movement. The function of bridge leadership in the civil rights movement is two-fold: first, serving to relay the needs of underrepresented groups within the Black community to the formal movement leadership, and second, to communicate and educate these same underrepresented sub-groups to more fully reap the benefits of the civil rights movement.

SEPTIMA CLARK AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

A prime example of a successful bridge leader in the civil rights movement is Septima Clark. Clark worked heavily within the Citizenship Education program of the SCLC, ensuring that the needs of rural Black communities were met through the utilization of frame extension. Frame extension is a strategy employed in order to garner the participation of a larger subgroup of a population within a movement that either does not feel the need to participate or simply is not aware of a movement (Robnett 13). Clark's ability to "connect the politics of the movement to the needs of the people" allowed her to effectively engage an often-neglected subgroup within the Black community: the rural lower class. Septima Clark took it upon herself to educate members of the rural, working-class Black community about the importance of citizenship rights to encourage participation in the civil rights movement. Clark not only engaged the underserved community but also, throughout her experiences with this community, was able to bring to light the specific unmet needs of this population to the formal leadership of the SCLC that would never otherwise be known. Ultimately, bridging the community to the formal organization leadership through grass-roots activism is what made these organizations successful.

A closer look at a workbook for a Citizenship School, spearheaded by Clark, reveals the intentionality behind the curriculum of the citizenship schools. For instance, "The Purpose of the Citizenship School" section of the workbook explicitly states that even though the Schools' "immediate program is literacy…[to] enable students to pass literacy tests for voting," the skills acquired through the program will allow for "an all-round education in community development which include housing, recreation, health, and improved home life"

("SCLC Citizenship"). This language points to the concerted effort of women such as Septima Clark to build a sustainable foundation within the civil rights movement so that any advances made by African Americans will benefit even those who are not directly involved in the organization and leadership of the movement. Considering the way that Citizenship Schools were never fully acknowledged as being a critical component of the SCLC and greater civil rights movement emphasizes the differences in strategic agendas of bridge leaders and formal leaders within the movement (Brown-Nagin 82). Women were a much larger part of the creation and continuing implementation of the Citizenship Education Program, which is evidenced in the Citizenship Workshop Schedule for June 17, 1963. The list of all active workers for the Workshop includes 33 total workers, two-thirds of whom are women. Additionally, Annell Ponder discusses in her essay, "Citizenship Education in the 'Heart of the Iceberg,'" that of the eight out of the initial twelve people who were recruited to train for and teach the Citizenship Workshops who "overcame their own apprehension over possible reprisals . . . ALL eight were women" (6). Women clearly contributed to a much greater extent than men to the Citizenship Education Program – an initiative that, "in spite of all the harassments, reprisals and intimidations," managed to register over 1300 people to vote in Leflore County alone (Ponder 10). Despite the evidence that women were the major forces in both initiating and accomplishing this feat, the face of the Citizenship Education Program became the leadership of the SCLC, namely SCLC President Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Initially, formal civil rights movement leadership was notoriously against the Citizenship Education Program. However, as discussed, women believed in the power of the Program to uplift the entire Black community, along with uplifting the movement as a whole.

FANNIE LOU HAMER AND STRATEGIC LANGUAGE

Another substantial example of a bridge leader, Fannie Lou Hamer, gave many highly regarded and well-known speeches that are commonly referred to in the recollection of Hamer's legacy. However, several of Hamer's less well-known speeches, which were generally given to smaller audiences, provide a glimpse into how Hamer's style of activism transcends on a smaller scale within the Black community. To illustrate, Hamer gave her speech, "We're on Our Way," in 1964 at the Negro Baptist School in Indianola, Mississippi. As discussed in her speech, Indianola is a significant location for Hamer due to her experience with the police and oppression in the town. "We're on Our Way" is one of Hamer's lesser-known speeches due to its small and local audience. In this instance of lesser publicity, though, Hamer showcases her ability to level herself with her audience to appeal to a sense of relatability. Hamer's speech portrays a storytelling quality that makes her extremely personable, unlike some of the more formal speech styles of other prominent civil rights leaders. Hamer does not shy away from using African American English in her speeches, which further signifies a purposeful resistance of respectability politics. To

illustrate, Hamer uses the habitual form of 'be' when she states, "He wasn't ready, but I been ready a long time." The use of habitual 'be' is a common linguistic variable in African American English that marks Black identity in certain cases (Bailey and Thomas). While Hamer could engage in relatable language that enhanced her message for Black audiences, she also understood that the power of this language was not conducive in all spaces, namely, White spaces.

In her political endeavors, such as in her 1965 Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration in Washington D.C., Hamer sticks to a script that maintains a greater repertoire of standard White American language and grammar. Presenting this drastic level of code-switching indicates Hamer's awareness of how to best leverage her positionality relative to her audience. To circle back to bridge leadership, one of the key takeaways from Robnett's theory is that bridge leaders are not formal leaders in the traditional sense of the word. One could argue that Hamer's foray into politics is akin to formal leadership. However, I believe that the purpose of her activism remained rooted in her effort to bring *all members* of the Black population, including rural and working-class communities, to the forefront of the civil rights movement. This inherently places Hamer in an unorthodox position relative to both the other activists who surrounded her and the underrepresented Black communities with whom she could relate. Evidenced once again, Hamer served as a "bridge" between two spheres and ostensibly understood how to manipulate her persona for the benefit of those who were not benefited by the mainstream formal movement.

In contrast to the more formal leaders of the civil rights movement, who sought to maintain an image of educated and upper-class personas to try and pander to White Americans, Hamer is more focused on uplifting under-represented communities of Black people through conveying a sense of representation within the movement. Women of the civil rights movement, including Hamer, understood that different communities require different communication styles to better engage in the movement.

THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

Since the times of slavery, the Church has served as a focal point for unifying the Black community and strengthening their resilience and ability to resist. It is no surprise, then, that the dominant public civil rights movement built its foundation out of the roots of the church and subsequently used the Church as a model for the structure and leadership of the civil rights movement. Most notably, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor and used his influence from this powerful position as a means to spearhead a large part of the civil rights movement. Moreover, since the civil rights movement was rooted in the church, ideologies of peace and non-violence seeped into some of the main tenets of the movement. Not only was this a smart tactic on the part of civil rights leaders as a way to maintain peace, but the strong connection between the Church and the civil rights movement brought

an element of moral duty to anyone who was a part of the Church—both Black and White—to also take part in the civil rights movement. Religion was often used by many civil rights leaders, and especially female leaders, as a strategy for curating an emotional argument that, to many people, also built a sense of credibility to the goals of the civil rights movement. Even though the Church was a large part of the formal movement, Black women's use of religious rhetoric was a tactic of bridge leadership because it was used in strategic conjunction with other forms of activism, such as resisting respectability, in order to bring together two separate ends of the spectrum together within the movement.

Ella Baker is one example of employing religious rhetoric in her activism throughout the civil rights movement. In her address at Hattiesburg, Baker invokes religious rhetoric that is consistent with her belief in a cause greater than solely a racial fight. Baker saw the civil rights movement through a lens of greater equality of human beings as granted by divine power. Using words such as "Almighty," "spirit," and "scripture," Baker ties together the concepts of equality and religious duty. In turn, any religious audience members will hear Baker's call to action and feel intrinsically obligated to adhere to Baker's message. Hamer, like Baker once again, also employs religious rhetoric throughout her speech, "We're on Our Way." For instance, Hamer compares Bob Moses, an influential civil rights leader, with a prophet that God sent to Egypt to free his people. This analogy is told in a way to convince the audience that the work of civil rights leaders is just as significant to humanity as the role of God's prophets in Biblical times. Moreover, Hamer's 1963 speech, "I Don't Mind My Light Shining," fully hinges on a religious narrative, with the first line of the speech directly quoting an excerpt from the biblical text of Luke. Hamer quotes nine Bible verses in her short speech. Hamer's purpose in this speech is to call the Black audience to take part in the "Freedom vote," "a 'mock election' designed to dramatize… that disenfranchised black Mississippians would cast a ballot if given the opportunity" (Brooks 3). This endeavor required a large participation rate to succeed, and Hamer utilized religious rhetoric to encourage her audience to take part in the mock election in order to blur any doubt or apprehension within the audience that this would be a worthwhile use of their time.

While a rhetoric of religion seems contradictory to Black women's resistance to respectability, it actually is a tactical strategy on the part of women to maintain a connection to the structural organization of the civil rights movement. Additionally, by keeping loyal to their religious duties, women were able to prove that going against traditional means of respectability was not inherently anti-religious and was a social movement that could co-exist with the Black Church. Black women were already delegated out of the spotlight, so to remain in the loop of the movement and its organizations they could not sever their ties with the religious leadership of the movement. This does not indicate that leaders such as Baker or Hamer feigned religiosity, but just that they willfully made religion a prominent component of their activism as a

way to strengthen their connection with local Black communities while preserving their relationship with the powerful forces of the civil rights movement. To illustrate the consequences of taking part in activism outside the confines of the Church, Malcolm X's association with the Nation of Islam actually alienated him from the dominant movement. His ideals did not suit the rhetoric that the Church embodied, such as ideals of non-violent resistance. Civil rights leaders viewed Malcolm X as a threat to the curated image of the movement and accordingly incited fear of radical activists such as Malcolm X. Ostensibly, Black women aptly used the structure of the Church to their advantage to further the success of the civil rights movement.

CONCLUSION

Black women unquestionably played invaluable roles as leaders, activists, and community members within the civil rights movement. Activists are extremely intentional with their strategies of involvement, mobilization, and their overall roles within broader movements in order to effectively take advantage of their abilities and status granted by society. Specifically, women of the civil rights movement positioned themselves as bridge leaders between formal leadership and local communities to have the greatest impact given the limitations of women gaining power at the time. Within their mediating position, Black women employed a strategy of unifying and connecting with the populace through the use of religious rhetoric while also staking their allegiance with working-class and other underrepresented Black Americans. Relatability was a large draw to many of the women leaders that stood the test of time since the civil rights movement.

Today, Black people in America continue to live in an unequal and oppressive society. Through the decades, it becomes more and more evident that African Americans' suffering is perpetuated by legal and structural violence that underlies the foundations of the United States. The culmination of the civil rights movement with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 offered the nation a façade of post-racialism that was not powerful enough to fundamentally change the racist wiring of the American psyche. Upon reflecting on the civil rights legacy, specifically of women, I conclude that Black women recognized the potential of their people and sought change from within themselves rather than seeking positive and long-lasting change from external sources. Women positioned themselves on the periphery of public perception for the benefit of uplifting African Americans during and long after the civil rights movement. Today, Black women are at the forefront of fighting for social justice, including in racial, gender, and queer spaces. While recognition of these women, the likes of Patrisse Cullors, Tarana Burke, Kimberly Crenshaw, and countless others, remains abysmal, these continue in the footsteps of their predecessors by persevering for the sake of substantial change and equality for *all* of their communities, not only for themselves.

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