

# Teaching Race and Revolution: Doing Justice to Women's Roles in the Struggle for Civil Rights

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This paper describes a freshman seminar, *Race and Revolution*, which examines the Civil Rights Movement with an emphasis on less well known activists who fought for racial justice. In the process of recognizing many of these individuals, we elevate the agency of African American women in the Civil Rights Movement and the concept of intersectionality, the overlapping of social identities such as gender and race, as central course themes. In political science courses, the Civil Rights Movement is often taught from the perspective that emphasizes the actions of a select group of charismatic leaders—all male—as responsible for its success. While women such as Rosa Parks are included in the conversation, they are often treated as accidental heroes rather than leaders in their own right. For example, Parks is popularly characterized as a tired seamstress whose refusal to give up her seat on a bus laid bare a nation's consciousness about the evils of racial segregation despite the fact that Parks was, in reality, a seasoned political activist by the time she refused to give up her seat.

The traditional narrative presents a biased picture of the Civil Rights Movement. It marginalizes the contributions of women, reflects a broader pattern of pedagogy that relegates women's participation to the sidelines of politics and history, and offers an overly narrow view of how substantive social and political change occurs. In reality, women were actively engaged in peer education, planning, outreach, and fund-raising in communities across the United States, particularly in the South. Women were capable and effective agents of grassroots political change. We focus on women's activism and the construction of its narrative because merely repeating the dominant narrative would perpetuate the misunderstanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Further, this inclusive approach is generalizable to other courses and has the added value of encouraging students to critically evaluate the dominant narratives around which other important historical and political events are understood and taught. In this article we focus on two specific activities in our *Race and Revolution* seminar that move gender prominently to the forefront of course content. First, we correct the conventional narrative of Rosa Parks' activism. Second, we broaden the Civil Rights Movement narrative with a semester-long research project on the contributions of lesser-known activists, many of whom are women.

## WOMEN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT NARRATIVE

The exclusion of women from the Civil Rights Movement narrative speaks to a broader theme of women's omission from important historical events, particularly in the retelling of these events through course textbooks (Stroup and Garriott 1997; Olivo 2012; Cassese et al. 2014). When considering the related problem of African Americans' underrepresentation in what Apple and Christian-Smith (1991; see also Wallace and Allen 2008) identify as the "legitimate knowledge" conferred to students by textbooks, they conclude that the effect of this omission is to communicate a selected narrative that elevates the experiences and participation of one group at the expense of many others. Traditional instruction in the Civil Rights Movement follows a predictable path; students learn of key protest events in the Movement, including the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the 1961 Freedom Rides, and, the 1963 March on Washington, but not about the women organizers who made these events transformative in the fight for racial justice.

When women are included in texts it is often through the narrow lens of presenting women as *beneficiaries*, not agents, of political change (Allen and Wallace 2010; Cassese et al. 2014). Thus, when we consider the example of the Civil Rights Movement, we find that the depth of most students' knowledge about the Movement is limited to the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. as charismatic leader and unilateral architect of the campaign of non-violent resistance for racial equality. Leaving women's contributions out of the Civil Rights Movement narrative presents an incomplete retelling of one of the most important social movements in American history but is nonetheless consistent with the traditional instructional approach.

To counteract this prevailing narrative we revisit the Civil Rights Movement and draw on the research of scholars—many of whom are women—to emphasize the central role of African American women as successful, deeply committed activists for racial justice in their own right. Here students learn that the very nature of African American women's activism, which was largely collaborative and community-based, helps explain why these contributions did not receive the attention they rightly deserved (Crawford et al. 1990; Barnett 1993; Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Olson 2001; Gore et al. 2009). We identify female-dominated grassroots activism as an equally important companion to male-dominated speeches, marches, and legal

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challenges as strategies for bringing about political and social change. We seek to give these women activists their due; that when students think of Martin Luther King, Jr., President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they also think of Ella Baker, one of the Conference's original founders who also founded the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to desegregate lunch counters and register voters. And, when students identify John Lewis as a Freedom Rider who challenged racial segregation in transportation they also

into small groups and given copies of books on Rosa Parks checked out from the children's section of an area county library. We ask students to first recall and share what they remember learning about Rosa Parks in school. Students then read passages from the children's books to find language that confirms or departs from these recollections of Parks and how, in turn, these stories bear little resemblance to the actual biography of Parks documented by McGuire (2011) and Theoharis (2013). Students are asked to consider why

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know that it was Diane Nash, co-founder of the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee, who was responsible for continuing the Freedom Rides after the first bus containing Freedom Riders was firebombed in Anniston, Alabama. This approach provides a fuller and more accurate accounting of the struggle for civil rights as a shared effort between men and women.

#### RECASTING THE ROSA PARKS BIOGRAPHY

Our main focus is a recasting of Rosa Parks's biography to demonstrate her long history of activism prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. We assign students recent scholarly works by McGuire (2011) and Theoharis (2013) that chronicle Parks's upbringing and early work as an investigator for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) documenting the widespread practice of rape of African American women by white men in commu-

the traditional, incomplete narrative of Parks persists as a lesson plan and why that narrative does not change much from what is established in elementary school.

The identification of Parks as a committed activist yields dividends in the goal of mainstreaming gender in the classroom. Learning about Parks's true activist identity is a revelation itself for most students as indicated through in-class discussions but also in open-ended comments gleaned from the end-of-semester course assessments. Students marvel at how little is known about "the real" Rosa Parks despite the fact that she is a universally known symbol for racial justice. This enhanced knowledge of Parks as a competent, seasoned activist challenges how students think and learn about social change, and the role of women as its agents, more broadly. Re-introducing students to Rosa Parks provides an opening for students to discover the lives of other women activists like

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nities throughout the South. Indeed, the prologue of Danielle McGuire's book, *At the Dark End of the Street*, introduces Parks by recounting her work as investigator to the brutal gang rape of Recy Taylor in 1944, a rape that went unprosecuted at the time.<sup>2</sup> Armed with that knowledge of her duties, students contrast that narrative with the prevailing one of Parks offered in children's books and in elementary and secondary public school lesson plans that portray her as a tired seamstress who one day decides she can no longer bear the injustice of having to move to the back of the bus and quietly refuses to give up her seat. In one classroom exercise, students are divided

JoAnn Robinson, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Dorothy Height and their contributions to the struggle for civil rights.

The discussion of Parks's work as an NAACP investigator and the widespread incidence of rape directed at African American women afford an additional opportunity to introduce the topic of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and explore how race and gender interact in the lives of women activists. The challenges faced by African American women bore little resemblance to those experienced by their white counterparts. Societal norms about the sexual identity of these groups of women were very different as white women

were to be protected and African American women were to be exploited. As Olson (2001) and McGuire (2011) document, African American women, activists or not, were terrorized for generations by sexual violence while white women were often pegged as traitors to their race and shamed as sexually promiscuous for organizing or speaking out against racial injustice. Such was the reaction to Viola Liuzzo, a white civil rights activist and mother who traveled from Detroit to Selma to help register black voters. Liuzzo was murdered by Klansmen for her activism, and yet Liuzzo was the one pilloried for abandoning her family.

At the same time, African American and white women endured gendered norms of appropriate conduct that expected women to prioritize family responsibilities over activism. Olson (2001) describes how the residues of slavery forced African American women to be more independent and assertive than white women, “many were nonetheless faced with the same middle-class expectations....to subordinate their own interests and desires to those of others, particularly husbands and families” (153). Despite the progressive nature of civil rights organizations, male activists often ignored women’s activism regardless of race. Our course exposes this double standard of behavior from male activists and emphasizes the role of women activists with in-depth segments on the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the Freedom Rides, and the Black Power Movement that rejected non-violent social protest.

#### RESEARCH PROJECT—BRINGING IN THE MARGINAL MEMORIES FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The second way in which we mainstream gender into the classroom in teaching the Civil Rights Movement is to broaden the narrative with a semester-long student research project on the contributions of lesser-known activists and evaluation of how his or her activism is recorded and remembered. Students produce a medium length research paper compiled from pri-

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mary and secondary sources and present their findings in class at the end of the semester. The project’s explicit focus on memory is designed to flex students’ critical thinking skills, particularly in contemplating why so many women activists are invisible in the narrative. For example, a student researching Pauline (Pauli) Murray will discover how Murray was a founding member of the Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights organization that used non-violent civil disobedience during the 1940s to protest racial segregation in busing and at lunch counters. Murray was also a prolific writer whose published work was cited by Thurgood Marshall, lead counsel for the NAACP, in his arguments against racial segregation argued before the Supreme Court. When Murray learned that no woman would address

the crowd during the March on Washington protest in 1963, Murray wrote a letter of complaint to one of its main organizers, labor activist A. Philip Randolph, and stated, “I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing in the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions.” (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2009, 89) Pauli Murray’s name, however, is not widely known despite her many accomplishments and long history of activism. Undertaking research on Murray and other lesser known civil rights activists broadens students’ knowledge of these underappreciated activists and their work to create a more just and inclusive system.

#### CONCLUSION: TEACHING RACE AND REVOLUTION

We mainstream gender in the teaching of the Civil Rights Movement by revisiting important political events in that era to emphasize the contributions of women as political actors, focus the shared class experience on the retelling of the Rosa Parks biography, and provide students the opportunity to engage in their own research and retelling project on a lesser known actor. This approach broadens students’ knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement, provides a more historically accurate portrayal of key themes, events, and people involved, and gives them an introductory experience to research. In the concluding weeks of the course we draw on this deeper understanding of the historical struggle for civil rights to raise parallels between the decades-old Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary struggles for racial justice in issues ranging from mass incarceration, voter ID laws, campus race relations, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. In other words, our inclusive approach arms students with the critical thinking skills required to problematize traditional accounts of any historical or political event. Students learn to reflect on the

narrative of how any issue is communicated or understood and, hopefully, question whose voices are left out of the dialogue and what is missed from their absence.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/S1049096516000986>. ■

#### NOTE

1. The Alabama State Legislature eventually offered Taylor a formal apology in 2011. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2011/04/21/AFDc3zLE\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2011/04/21/AFDc3zLE_story.html)

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