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# **Righting Wrongs**

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## **COMMENT – Intersectionality and Black Women in U.S. History**

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Throughout the course of my academic career, it has been uncommon for me to witness Black women – women who look like me and share the singular experiences that come with being Black women – having a role in history and change-making. As I grew up, I realized that I needed to delve further into my own studies in International Relations and International Human Rights to hear these women's voices. Sadly, I didn't know this until I reached university; it took years to understand that it is essential to see people who look like you making a difference in this world. It helps you believe that it is possible for individuals like you to make a difference; not to be used as a tool or a steppingstone, but rather to be their own force to fight for human rights.

This piece was inspired by a visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture during a Fall Break 2022 faculty-led trip to Washington, D.C. I argue that the underrepresentation of Black women in American historical memory reflects a broader omission of African American women from U.S. historical memory. This includes the lack of recognition of their participation and achievements in social movements, including the battle for Black liberation and the women's suffrage movement. Black women have been active in various American social movements, from the nineteenth and twenty centuries to present-day Black Lives Matter organizing. Yet Black women are often ignored in U.S. history, their stories relegated to the side lines as we focus on the accomplishments of white suffragettes and Black male civil rights leaders.

Notably, Black women's experiences and identities can best be understood through an intersectional approach. Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality," which is a concept that highlights the invisibility of vulnerable people. Intersectionality can be defined as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized

individuals or groups” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While Black women’s experiences are informed by gender, race, and other identities, they are often categorized in singular categories that ignore their intersectional identities. Too often, those singular categories are determined by how they fit into other people’s stories – not how they tell or experienced their own.

### **Black Women Paved the Way**

Following the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States, Black people throughout the late nineteenth century sought equality before the law through legislation and the attainment of political office. During the Reconstruction Era following the U.S. Civil War, freed African Americans attempted to integrate into the social, political, and economic framework of the United States. Black and white activists fought for suffrage, aiming to ensure that African Americans and women were afforded the right to vote. This was a time when Black women took on meaningful activism and played important roles in the history of American social movements, from well-known figures such as Rosa Parks to lesser-known women who paved the way for expanded rights protection.

Activism for voting rights highlighted racial divides within the United States, with Black women given the least priority for achieving suffrage. Such activism resulted in the establishment of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), for instance, which worked from 1866 to 1869 to secure equal voting rights irrespective of race or gender. The AERA engaged historic figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Fredrick Douglass, as well as influential Black American women including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria W. Stewart, and Frances Ellen Watkin Harper. The AERA divided the suffrage movement after the ratification of the 15th amendment, however, because it prioritized the right for Black men to vote but offered no protections for Black women’s suffrage (Harley, n.d.). Meanwhile, white women suffragists (including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony) disapproved of the fact that African American men were granted voting rights before they were. Black women activists such as Frances Harper joined the U.S. suffrage movement to continue the fight for Black suffrage. Even though they were excluded from the mainstream (predominantly white) women's suffragist movement in the United States at that time, many Black women nonetheless congregated to “attend and speak out” at public demonstrations, political and religious meetings, and other types of gatherings. “Their enthusiasm and political engagement within and outside suffrage campaigns was particularly concerning to whites in the post-emancipation South,” explains Sharon Harley (n.d.). The white suffragist movement, by promoting white women's rights while ignoring Black women, upheld white supremacy, and encouraged racial discrimination.

The National Association of Colored Women, which was founded by Mary Church Terrell, is one example of the spaces Black women created for themselves to campaign for their rights while being excluded by white activists (Gray White, n.d.). Such women's clubs provided a venue through which Black women could seek assistance through political activism on behalf of both their race and their gender. The Association gained traction with Black newspapers and had numerous branches across the United States, all while the white women's suffrage movement promoted political reform for white women near the end of the nineteenth century. In the early 1900s, the white suffrage movement



*Image 1: The creation of the National Association of Colored Women (1910). National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. Photo by the author.*

became more welcoming to Black women, yet its leaders still did not advocate for Black women voters. For Black women, however, suffrage was essential; Black activist Nannie Helen Burroughs made a meaningful statement by asking, “What can we do without it?” (Gray White, n.d.). And while Black women technically gained the right to vote with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, most did not enjoy the right until 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act (Gray White, n.d.).

The concept of intersectionality highlights how Black women were marginalized, in part, because of how they experienced race and gender. Rather than being embraced by the women’s suffrage movement, Black women were seen to be an extension of Black men. They were often shunned by white women activists, even though they shared similar struggles for gender equality; their race, not just their gender, prevented them from voting. It’s

notable that anti-Black rhetoric and themes of white supremacy are rarely directly addressed when the suffrage movement is taught in school. The women's movement is largely considered a progressive social movement, and historical narratives frequently ignore its hugely problematic aspects. To tell the story of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement in full, it is necessary to include its racial discrimination and the harms it perpetrated against Black women.

Black women played a crucial role in the struggle for racial equality during the American Civil Rights movement, but often faced sexism even within their own communities. Women were less likely

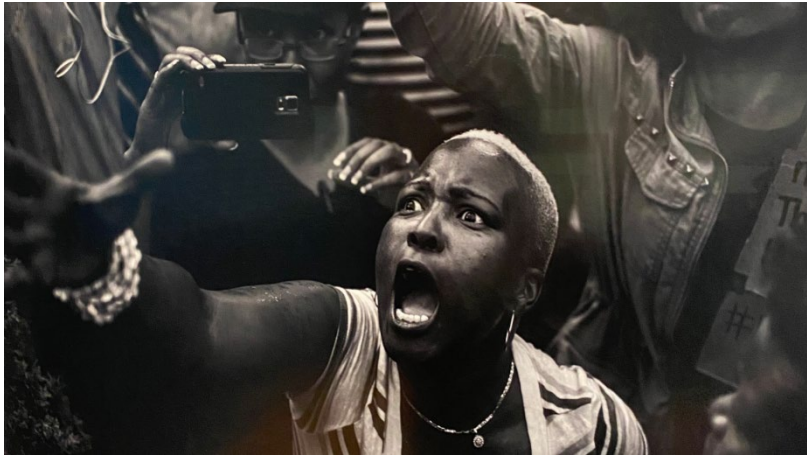
to get involved in social movements during the 1950s and 1960s because they were expected to remain in their traditional, gender roles as child bearers and homemakers. Michael Eric Dyson (2000) writes that even renowned civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was “absolutely a male chauvinist,” believing wives should stay home and care for children while men protested (see also Holladay, 2009). The sexism that permeated the Civil Rights movement severely restricted the roles that African American women were able to perform. Despite these difficulties, activists such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Joanne Robinson, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, and Ruby Hurley persisted in their efforts to eradicate segregation in the United States. That these women were subjected to oppression in broader society, as well as within their own community, demonstrates how Black women fought against adversity on multiple fronts.

During the Civil Rights movement and in the years afterward, Black women were often deemed as being unimportant or as playing a secondary role to Black men activists. Rosa Parks was a catalyst for the movement when she refused to give up her bus seat for a white person, and she is dubbed the “mother of the Civil Rights movement” (National Women’s History Museum, n.d.) – a gendered term that emphasizes her womanhood rather than her hard work. Mary Bethune, a pioneering educator who labored to obtain equality in education and was head of the National Youth Administration, is rarely mentioned in history lessons about the right to education (National Women’s History Museum, n.d.). In the 1950s and 1960s, most people had the perception that women were ignorant and more likely to take on support roles within the Civil Rights movement, rather than leadership roles. Yet despite these sexist assumptions, some Black women activists were able to make enormous strides in the civil rights fight. Daisy Bates, for instance, was president of the Arkansas chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and advised the nine students who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 (Stanford University, n.d.). Writing this essay, it occurs to me that although I have learned about school de-segregation many times before, I did not hear about Bates until I visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Black women like Bates tend to be overlooked, even when their work made significant events in U.S. history possible.

### **Black Women Today**

Today, African American women are active in social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and its associated “Say Her Name” campaign. Started in 2014 and propelled to nationwide prominence with the 2020 murder of George Floyd, BLM exposes the injustices and police brutality that are experienced primarily by Black men (Brown & Ray, 2020). While the BLM movement centers on the experiences of Black men – including Michael Brown and Eric Garner, both killed by the police – it has

been criticized for not highlighting Black women who are also victims of police brutality. That criticism fueled the organization of the “Say My Name” campaign, which centers the voices of Black women who



*Image 2: Image from Devin Allen’s (2015) A Beautiful Ghetto. National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. Photo by the author.*

have been victims of physical and sexual assault. This includes the death of Breonna Taylor, whose 2020 killing by police prompted the #SayHerName campaign (Brown & Ray, 2020). Not only does the “Say Her Name” campaign bring attention to racial injustices faced by Black women, but it also exposes wrongs faced by Black people who are

impoverished, homosexual, or transgender. I feel it is important to stress that we should not make the same mistake twice, especially when it comes to the exclusion of certain groups of people from historic rights movements. By adopting an inclusive stance and showing that people experience police violence in distinctly gendered ways, we can develop a broader picture of police violence – one that ought to draw equal public attention and outrage as the deaths of men (Chatelain & Asoka, 2015).

My experiences in Washington, DC, helped me better understand how Black women are portrayed in U.S. history. At the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, the exhibit “Defending Freedom and Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation” was devoted to the



*Image 3: Portrait of Breonna Taylor by Amy Sberald (2021). National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. From the “Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience” exhibition. Photo by the author.*

battles and challenges that Black American women fought during the Civil Rights movement. I watched a short film that referred to women whose names were unfamiliar to me and whose involvement in the fight for Black emancipation was unknown to me; why hadn’t I learned about women like Daisy Bates and Gloria Richardson before this? As I learned about these Black women who had been fearless catalysts for change within this movement, I reflected on my own educational journey over the previous 15 years. My education, in my opinion, did an inadequate job of teaching me about the significant contributions that Black women made in the Civil

Rights movement – a truth that I did not see until my eyes were opened in this national museum. I believe the study of Black history is presented in a one-dimensional manner in schools, one that highlights the contributions of influential Black men (and white allies) and obscures the work of Black women.

In conclusion, I suggest that the contributions of Black men and white women hide the significance of Black women's roles in American history. The triumphs and challenges of Black women can only be understood by evaluating their own lives, which requires us to take an intersectional approach and consider how their race and gender impacted their lived experiences. If we wish to have an inclusive and accurate understanding of the social movements that shaped this nation, we must learn the stories of Black women.

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