

Lesson Title: **We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women of the Civil Rights Movement**

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Historiography: Kaye Wise Whitehead

Grade Level: 6th – 8th

Unit: The Civil Rights Movement 1954-1972

Lesson Duration: One 60 minute class period

Historiography:

Black women have historically been actively involved in political and social action. During the early days of the Women’s Movement,¹ even though their participation was not always included in the history books, they were at the meeting tables helping to organize, fundraise and demonstrate for change. Maria Stewart,² Sojourner Truth,³ Mary Church Terrell⁴ and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper,⁵ are just a few of the 19th Century Black women who raised their voices and their pens against racial and gender inequality. They were forerunners for the 20th Century Black women who continued working to eradicate and document these inequalities. In 1896, the National League of Colored Women and the National Federation of Colored Women joined forces, forming the National Association of Colored Women. This organization was the foundation upon which the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), founded in 1935, and the four Black sororities, founded between the years of 1908 and 1922, were built.⁶ The women in these organizations played a major role in the struggle for civil rights.

The years 1954-1972⁷ of the modern Civil Rights Movement, were a time when Black people continued to struggle for equality and to end segregation, both in theory and in practice. Similar to their work during the antislavery movement of the 19th Century,

Black women were instrumental in the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Although their contributions and struggles may not be a part of the greater discussions,⁸ they must be noted and recognized in order to gain a truer understanding of the role women played to advance the cause of civil rights. Though there are a number of Black women from the Civil Rights Movement who could (and should) be profiled -- Ada Sipuel,⁹ Diane Nash¹⁰ and Gloria Richardson¹¹ immediately come to mind -- this document will specifically narrow the scope to look at those women whose contributions were so extensive that any civil rights conversation that does not include them is not accurate, complete or exact. These women, in a sense, are the lens through which one can see how the Civil Rights Movement was shaped and nurtured by the commitment and contributions of Black women, as a whole. Two of the women, Dr. Dorothy I. Height and Coretta Scott King are familiar names, but their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement may not be as well-known as they should be.¹² The other three, Ella Jo Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer,¹³ are names that may not be as familiar, but their contributions must be included (evaluated and critiqued) in the greater discussion about the Civil Rights Movement.

Ella Jo Baker worked as a field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), acting executive director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and as a mentor for the students who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1903, Baker was the granddaughter of slaves, and the daughter of a waiter and a teacher. In 1927, after challenging school policies and procedures, she graduated at the top of her class from Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina and moved to New York City.

She quickly became involved in the struggle for Black political and economic equality and later joined the Young Negroes Cooperative League. One year later, she was elected as the league's first national director. In 1940, Baker turned her strategizing efforts toward the NAACP, where she worked as a field secretary and later as director of branches. While there, she primarily worked on trying to shift the NAACP's focus away from legal strategizing to community-based activism. Additionally, as the first woman to head the NAACP's New York branch, Baker led the fight to desegregate New York's public schools. After resigning from the NAACP, Baker later worked with Bayard Rustin¹⁴ and established the "In Freedom" organization, which was committed to raising monies for civil rights activities in the South. In 1957, Baker relocated to Montgomery, Alabama to work with the SCLC¹⁵ and the Crusade for Citizenship voter registration campaign. Although Baker spent two years with the SCLC, she never completely accepted their goal of working to establish a strong leadership base rather than building a grassroots network.¹⁶ Like many Black women in the Movement during this time, Baker recognized that "from the beginning that as a woman... in a group of ministers who [were] accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for [her] to have come into a leadership role."¹⁷ Rather than defining herself in terms of her gender, Baker wrote, "I don't think I have thought of myself largely as a woman. I [have] thought of myself as an individual with a certain amount of sense of the need to participate in the movement."¹⁸ In 1960, after the first sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, Baker invited the student leaders to an organizing meeting at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Out of this meeting, SNCC, which later became the grassroots arm of the Civil Rights Movement, was founded. James Foreman, former executive director of SNCC,

stated, “there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee” without the work of Baker.¹⁹ She was also involved with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s (MFDP) unsuccessful struggle to replace the all-white delegation from Mississippi at the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Although she has been called an “unsung hero for the Civil Rights Movement,”²⁰ Ella Jo Baker’s name and contributions are not included in state-wide school curriculums.

Septima Poinsette Clark, a close friend of Baker, is another noteworthy activist whose contributions are not known and discussed. Born in 1898, Clark was the second of eight children born to Peter Poinsette, a former slave from a low-country plantation, and Victoria Warren Anderson, a free-born Black woman who had grown up in Haiti. Clark grew up in Charleston, South Carolina and attended the Avery Normal Institute, which had been established by missionaries with the goal of educating Black children. After graduating from Benedict College, Clark earned a Masters degree from Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). In 1918, she joined the NAACP, worked as their field secretary and sought to educate adults on citizenship and literacy, so that they could then register to vote. Clark preached and practiced empowerment through education. As the Director of Workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, a biracial training center for community activists, Clark developed citizenship schools, which taught adult literacy, basic life skills and encouraged and assisted with voter registration. In 1961, the program was transferred to the SCLC and, by 1970, the project had established over 800 schools and had over 100,000 graduates, many of whom became involved in the grassroots efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. One of her most famous students at Highlander was Rosa Parks, who attended a desegregation workshop in 1955, months

before she refused to give up her seat on the bus. Even with all of her work and accomplishments, Clark felt that women, as a whole, were not taken seriously in the struggle to advance civil rights. She stated that, “those men didn’t have any faith in women, none whatsoever. I was just a figurehead... whenever I had anything to say I would put up my hand and say it. But I did know that they weren’t paying attention.”²¹

In 1979, Septima Poinsette Clark was awarded the Living Legacy Award and though her name is not well-known, it should be, along with information about her dedication to raising Black adult literacy rates, increasing the number of southern Black voters and working in the Civil Rights Movement.

Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper from Mississippi, a field secretary for SNCC and a founding member of MFDP, was born in 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi. The youngest of nineteen siblings, she spent most of her life working alongside them in the cotton fields. During that time, she attended school for only six years and lived in a home where there was no heating or plumbing system and no adequate nutrition. She also suffered from an accident, which went untreated, and left her with a life-long limp. In 1962, when SNCC began their voter registration drive in her area, Hamer joined them and later, along with seventeen other volunteers, she tried to register to vote at the county seat in Indianola. Even though they failed the registration test, Hamer was determined to be actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement. This simple but complicated act of trying to register, led to her losing her home and her job as a record keeper at a local plantation, being shot at by nightriders and suffering constant harassment by local authorities. One year later, Hamer was unfairly arrested and severely beaten while attending citizenship classes in Winona, Mississippi. In 1964, Hamer was instrumental in

founding MFDP and later led the delegation to the Democratic National Convention, where they challenged the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi delegation. They also demanded that the MFDP delegates be seated and recognized as official delegates. At the same time, she launched her campaign to be elected to Congress as the MFDP candidate. Although she did not win, her campaign did bring national attention to her and to the MFDP. Hamer was the only woman to speak at the convention on behalf of the MFDP and many called her presentation “spellbinding,” as she declared that she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”²² While Hamer’s contributions may not be well-known, by 1968, just four years after her work at the Atlantic City convention, the Mississippi delegation was integrated and a Black man, Robert Clark, was elected to the state legislature. Peter Levy in his book, *The Civil Rights Movement*, writes that Hamer and Baker both challenged the notions of domesticity by involving themselves actively in the struggle. He goes on to say that they were “strong women who defied the notion that assertive women were not real women.”²³ Like Ella Jo Baker and Septima Poinsette Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer’s contributions to the struggle for civil rights should be noted and routinely discussed.

Dr. Dorothy Irene Height, a noted civil rights activist, still serves as President Emeritus of the National Council of Negro Woman (NCNW), one of the country’s largest and most influential Black women’s groups of the twentieth century.²⁴ Born in 1912 in Richmond, Virginia, Height grew up in Rankin, Pennsylvania, and graduated from New York University with both a Bachelor and a Masters degree in educational psychology. She also studied at the New York School of Social Work before becoming a social worker in Harlem, and a member of the United Christian Youth Movement (UCYM).

Height's work with the UCYM provided her with an opportunity to work and travel with Eleanor Roosevelt. At the age of 25, she began working with Mary McLeod Bethune at the NCNW, where she continued to serve, even while working for other organizations. Over the years, Height has held significant leadership positions with the National Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), as their Associate Director for Leadership Training Services; with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., as their President; and with the National Council of Women of the United States, as their vice-president. In 1956, after she had worked on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services,²⁵ Height was appointed to the Social Welfare Board of New York.²⁶ One year later, Height became the president of NCNW, a post she held for five decades. As leader of the NCNW, Height traveled the world working to secure equal rights and justice for women and people of color. Her special focus was on elevating the economic and educational status of African American women and strengthening the black family. In 1960, the Committee on Correspondence sent Height to five African countries to research and write a study on their women's organizations.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Height was one of the major strategists. In 1964, she organized "Wednesdays in Mississippi," a historic forum for a series of open dialogues about race between Black and white women from the North and South. She marched with Dr. King, met with SNCC organizers, and worked with Rosa Parks. She is also the only woman who worked with the Civil Rights Big Six²⁷ and was there when President John F. Kennedy met with the members to organize the historic March on Washington. Despite her position as the leader of a major organization, Height found that she could not convince her male colleagues to include a woman on the roster of

speakers for the march. Height described some of the difficulties in getting women's contributions recognized, "It was hard sometimes for them to realize, as in the March on Washington, the importance of women's rights. I think that we were so absorbed in the racial situation and racism, and if you remember at the March on Washington, despite all of our efforts, and many women joined me, we were not able to get a woman to speak. The only female voice heard was a singer, Mahalia Jackson."²⁸ Even though she has received dozens of honorary degrees and countless awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and she has created a nationwide annual celebration, The Black Family Reunion, with gatherings across the country, Dr. Dorothy I. Height's name is still not included as a major civil rights leader in history texts about the Civil Rights Movement.

Outside of organizing on the frontlines, there were a number of women who organized, supported and participated on the home front as well. The wives of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were sometimes seen but rarely heard. In addition to balancing the demands and needs of the Civil Rights Movement, they were often single-handedly responsible for meeting the demands and needs of their families. One key figure who evolved from the wife of an activist to an activist in her own right was Coretta Scott King. Often seen as simply the wife of a great man, which was not a small accomplishment, her personal accomplishments and contributions often go overlooked. Throughout the world, she is as well-known in name as her husband but not necessarily for her accomplishments. Born in 1927, in rural Alabama, Coretta Scott King was the second of three children of Obadiah and Bernice Scott. King attended a private high school, pursued her interest in music and later won a scholarship to Antioch College in

Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she studied music and elementary education. In 1948, she debuted as a vocalist at Second Baptist Church and later performed with Paul Robeson.²⁹ Three years later, she entered the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. It was there that she met and married Martin Luther King, Jr., and after graduating from the Conservatory, she moved with him to Montgomery, Alabama. At that time, King was not a well-known figure; his national and international achievements came later when he was fully immersed in the struggle for civil rights. The fact that Mrs. King kept the home and protected the children accorded him a certain amount of freedom to focus his attention on the struggle. Additionally, King often joined her husband in civil rights demonstrations and marches,³⁰ she spoke at rallies and she organized and performed at fundraising events. According to Representative John Lewis (D-GA), “She was the glue that held the movement together.”³¹ After her husband was assassinated in 1968, King became even more actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement. One year later, she founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia.³² In addition, she continued to organize and lead major demonstrations for the rights of the poor; she organized the 20th Anniversary March on Washington and she traveled across the world protesting and speaking out against injustice. In 1986, after her tireless campaign,³³ her husband’s birthday was finally celebrated as a federal holiday. Coretta Scott King’s contributions and accomplishments as a civil rights leader, in her own right, have earned her the right, along with Dr. Height, to be an integral part of the greater discussions about the Civil Rights Movement.

It is important to know and understand the accomplishments of Black male leaders during the Civil Rights Movement, and it is equally important to recognize and

highlight the achievements of the women who, while they were not always recognized as leaders, stepped forward to organize and direct when there was work to be done. As the history continues to be written, debated and discussed, the conversation must be broadened to include the successes (and failures) of everyone, male and female, who was involved.

Annotated Bibliography:

Primary Sources

Applebome, Peter, "Coretta Scott King, 78, Widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dies". *New York Times*, 31 January 2006. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/31/national> > (accessed 10 July 2006)

This newspaper article provides some insight into the many contributions of Coretta Scott King by presenting her life through the eyes of individuals who fought in the Civil Rights Movement. Quotes from leaders in the movement as well as some biographical information on Mrs. King are presented in this article.

Birnbaum, Jonathan and Clarence Taylor, ed. Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle, New York University Press, 2000.

This is a comprehensive collection of writings, speeches, memoirs, and official papers of individuals and organizations that have struggled for civil rights since the 18th century. It chronicles writings of the black civil rights struggle from slavery into the modern civil rights era and closes by addressing the black community in the 21st century.

Congressional Record: House of Representatives. "Celebration in Honor of Dr. Dorothy Irene Height". February 27, 2001. <<http://www.house.gov>> (accessed July 5, 2006)

This congressional record celebrates Dorothy I. Height as an activist and a feminist. Her many accomplishments are highlighted as well as the accomplishments of the National Council of Negro Women.

Online News Hour. *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: Gwen Ifill talks with Dorothy Height, a legend of the civil rights movement and former head of the National Council of Negro Women, about her memoir, Open Wide the Freedom Gates.*

< http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/height_07-17.html > (accessed 10 July 2006)

This internet source is an online interview of civil rights activist Dorothy I. Height. In the interview, Height discusses what it was like to be a woman in the movement and how she sought to bring about equality and desegregation while realizing that black women were not treated as equals by male leaders in the movement.

Secondary Sources

Dubois, W.E.B. "Reconstruction and Its Benefits". *American Historical Review*, July 1910.

This article, written by brilliant but often controversial scholar, W.E.B. Dubois, outlines the benefits reconstruction brought to the black community following the Civil War. Dubois analyzes what he calls the three pillars of reconstruction, which are schools, the Freedmen's Bureau and the Black church.

Foner, Eric. Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

This highly celebrated text takes a comprehensive look at American reconstruction and its successes and failures. It is a great resource for analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of Reconstruction on the lives of Black people in both the North and the South.

Olson, Lynn. Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Olson's book takes an extensive look at the many women who have contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. The text provides a detailed chronological story of women who have not been celebrated for their contributions to the civil rights struggle in the 19th & 20th century. The text also addresses the historiography of the movement and why women have not been presented in great detail.

¹ In 1883, of the eighteen women who signed the constitution of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, seven of them were Black and at the 1837 Convention of American Women, one out of every ten women was Black. At the latter convention, Grace Douglass, great grandaunt of Paul Robeson, was elected as the Vice-President. We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century. Sterling, Dorothy, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984. p114

² Maria Stewart was the first Black woman and the first American woman to give a public lecture and to speak to a mixed audience (men and women). Ibid, 154

³ Isabella Baumfree was a former slave who became a preacher and a Women's Rights activist who traveled and spoke across New England and the Midwest. In 1851, she supposedly asked the question "Ain't I a Woman?" as she bared her breasts to a group of proslavery auditors who openly questioned her gender. The accuracy of the event, as retold by white reformer Frances Dana Gage, twelve years after it "happened," has recently been questioned by historians. Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience. Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., eds. New York: Perseus Books Group, 1999. p1889

⁴ Mary Church Terrell was a civil rights leader and women's rights activist who was the first Black woman to serve on the Washington, DC school board and was primarily responsible for helping to found the National Association of Colored Women. She remained active up until her death in 1954.

⁵ Born free in Baltimore, MD in 1825, Harper was an antislavery and women's rights activist, lecturer and author.

⁶ Founded on the campus of Howard University, Alpha Kappa Alpha was established in 1908; Delta Sigma Theta in 1911 and Zeta Phi Beta in 1920. Sigma Gamma Rho was established in 1922 at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana.

⁷ See *Integrating With All Deliberate Speed* lesson plan for a greater discussion of the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

⁸ This is important to note because current national Social Studies curriculums do not have a separate unit on Black women, nor do they extend the required conversation beyond the work of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King. The conversations tend to include information about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC); Stokely Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); the work of the Council for Racial Equality, particularly the Freedom Rides and the Sit-In Movement. See either the National Council for Social Studies' Content Standards at <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards> (accessed July 23, 2006) or the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) History Standards at <http://www.mcrcel.org/standards-benchmarks/docs/history.asp> (accessed July 23, 2006) for further information.

⁹ Ada Sipuel was the first black woman to integrate the University of Oklahoma's Law School. Her case, *Sipuel v. University of Oklahoma*, was decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1948 (though this is six years before the "start" of the Civil Rights Movement, the decision helped to draft the arguments for the *Brown* case).

¹⁰ Diane Nash Bevel was one of the co-founders of SNCC, a civil rights activist and a co-recipient, along with her husband, of SCLC's Rosa Parks Award in 1965.

¹¹ Gloria Richardson was the head of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC), which was the adult affiliate of SNCC.

¹² For example, Mrs. Coretta Scott King's biography in the *Africana* starts by stating that she is the widow of Dr. King and then explains who he was. Ibid, 1095 In *Black Saga*, Dr. Height's name is not included in any of the events that happened during the Civil Rights Movement up until 1991. Christian, Charles M. *Black Saga: The African American Experience*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

¹³ The argument is not that they are not known but they and their contributions are not as well-known as the male counterparts.

¹⁴ Bayard Rustin, a civil rights activist, was one of the leaders of the Congress of Racial Equality's (CORE) 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which sent freedom riders into the South on buses. This freedom ride served as a model for the 1961 freedom rides.

¹⁵ In 1957, the SCLC was founded by Dr. King, Bayard Rustin and other Black ministers, with the purpose of consolidating the efforts of all of the existing civil rights organizations.

¹⁶ Africana, 165

¹⁷ Birnbaum, Jonathan and Taylor, Clarence, eds. Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle. New York University Press, 2000. p 470

¹⁸ Olson, Lynn. Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. p471

¹⁹ Hampton, Henry and Foyer, Steve. Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s. New York: Bantam Books, 1990.

²⁰ Africana, p165

²¹ Olson, 221

²² Levy, Peter B. The Civil Rights Movement. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998. p133

²³ Ibid, 116

²⁴ Founded by Mary McLeod Bethune, NCNW, currently has an outreach to four million women in the United States, Egypt, Senegal and Zimbabwe.

²⁵ General George C. Marshal appointed Dr. Height to the Committee, where she served from 1952-1955.

²⁶ Dr. Height was appointed by Governor Averell Harriman and reappointed in 1961 by Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

²⁷ The members of the "Big Six" were Dr. King, SCLC; James Farmer, CORE; John Lewis, SNCC; A. Philip Randolph, Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters; Roy Wilkins, NAACP; and Whitney Young, National Urban League

²⁸ Online News Hour. Open Wide the Freedom Gates: Gwen Ifill talks with Dorothy Height, a legend of the civil rights movement and former head of the National Council of Negro Women, about her memoir, Open Wide the Freedom Gates. < http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/height_07-17.html> (accessed 10 July 2006)

²⁹ Paul Robeson was a civil rights activist and internationally renowned singer, actor and speaker.

³⁰ Black Saga, 427

³¹ Applebome, Peter, "Coretta Scott King, 78, Widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dies". *The New York Times*, 31 January 2006. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/31/national>> (accessed 10 July 2006)

³² The primary purpose of The Center was to train people in how to organize and participate in nonviolent social protest. See www.thekingcenter.org for further information. (accessed July 22, 2006)

³³ In 1970, Black and white leaders from across the nation celebrated the anniversary of Dr. King's death and committed to working to establish his birthday as a national holiday. Mrs. King led the fight which lasted for sixteen years.