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A Legacy of Leadership: Black Female Adult Educators

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This paper profiles the lives of four Black female adult educators whose leadership, power, and activism influenced the educational and political advances of the Black community. While it is not the author's intention to marginalize the stories of the women presented in this manuscript, Anna Julia Cooper, Charlotte Forten Grimke, Ida B. Wells, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer made significant contributions as activists and educators who embodied teaching as a leadership style that focused on the development of others. Their struggles and lessons learned remain relevant even today. The biographical summaries presented on these remarkable female adult educators are an important reminder of how education became and remains the vehicle for social mobility and economic success that Black women used to not only improve their lives but also the quality of life for the Black community as a whole.

Keywords: Forten Grimke; Ida B. Wells; Septima Clark; Fannie Lou Hamer; Adult Educators; Black Women; Adult/Continuing Education; Women and Gender Studies; Race, Ethnicity and Class

Introduction

Dr. Anna Julia Cooper completed a Ph.D. in Latin at the age of 62 and later wrote her best-known 1892 publication, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. Anna Julia Cooper is recognized as a public educator and leader in improving the Black American circumstance. As the United States embarked on the 20th century, Cooper's vision included new opportunities for women, especially Black women and was an accurate prediction of how Black women have come to be seen as central to the survival of Black American community (Cooper, 2000; Hill Collins, 2000; May & Guy-Sheftall, 2007). The new opportunities to which Cooper refers are evidenced today as more women are holding leadership positions in traditionally male professions (i.e., presidents of higher educational institutions, CEOs in corporate America, and elected and appointed government positions). Indeed, Black women have made significant advances, yet still face historic race and gender barriers to reaching their full potential. Cooper (2000) states,

[Black] women of to-day occupy [*sic*], one may say, a unique position in this country...her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both. (p. 92)

Cooper suggested that the approach of the 20th century should call for the recognition of women's greater status in society and that they have and will continue to play a significant educational leadership role in guiding the country to "greater plains" (p. 92). More specifically, it is Black women who will be the guiding force in "lifting" the Black community out of subjugation to greater self-empowerment.

Cooper's predictions have come to fruition as we now see Black women in senior level leadership positions historically filled by men in the areas of government, business and industry, and education, many of whom are firsts in their respective positions.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the important contributions of key Black female adult educators whose leadership and political stances remain examples for contemporary adult female learners to follow to combat today's education and social ills facing Black America. With Cooper as an example of a Black female educator and leader with a political agenda, the following sections identify and describe the contributions of other Black women educational and community leaders: Charlotte Forten Grimke, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ida B. Wells. Why are these women's stories relevant in the year 2017. Countless numbers of Black women's contributions to improving the political, social, economic, and educational standing of all Americans, all of

whom cannot be recognized in this manuscript, in the collective represent reservoir of strength. As a member of the X generation and rising leaders within the adult and higher education profession, we are reminded of the importance of this manuscript. We have at hand the proverbial play book from which we can continue to learn to manage today's social, educational, and economic challenges. Yes, these challenges may be packaged differently today in comparison to earlier times; however, they still require a strong grounding in education, selflessness, perseverance, a desire to uplift the communities to which we serve. It is not our intention to marginalize Black American women's stories but to give voice to the significant contributions Black women have made as activists and educators who embodied teaching as a leadership style that focused on the development of others. Their struggles and lessons learned remain relevant even today.

In order to understand fully Black women's leadership role and contributions as educators, it is foremost essential to explore their leadership exhibited during slavery. It is also important to understand how education became the vehicle for freedom, social mobility, and economic success that Black women used to not only to improve their lives but also the quality of life for the black community as a whole.

Sheroes: A Legacy of Strength

Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of the struggle for human and civil rights promulgating their blood, sweat, and tears, with the goal of sustaining families, communities, and to building the very foundation upon which the United States is built. In spite of barriers and obstacles of many kinds, Black women have excelled in all fields. Education is perhaps the oldest and most important among them for it is here that Black women have given great service and struggled the longest for opportunity and equality (Allen, 1997; Hazzard, 1982; King & Ferguson, 2011; Peterson, 1996;). The educational opportunities for Black women and girls for the period preceding Emancipation were limited. In America as slaves, Black women were at the very bottom of the social ladders, deprived of all rights and vulnerable to the constant abuses of men, Black and White as well as to the hatred and scorn of White women (Hazzard, 1982). Black women like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth who were the "titans of the Abolitionist Movement" (Murray, 2000) exhibited unbridled leadership qualities (e.g., self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, militancy with an egalitarian spirit, resilience, and spiritual grounding) during a time when Black women's 'womanhood' was being defined and exploited by a racist, sexist, and oppressive patriarchal system of dominance. According to Marble (1990), one decisive form of sexist oppression is the control slave owners had over Black women's reproductive rights. Slave owners raped Black female slaves; they were told when and how to have children, subjected to a Eurocentric construction of the "Black female matriarch," and worse yet, were not considered "women." To combat these forces Black women exerted their power through the form of resistance. Sojourner Truth, for example, bared her breasts to

prove that she indeed was a woman before an antislavery rally comprised of white women more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Men from the audience yelled back at here that they did not believe she was a woman, which "unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for Black womanhood" (hooks, 1997). Later, Truth in her famous *Ain't I a Woman* speech delivered in Akron, Ohio in 1851 at the second annual convention for the women's rights movement, become one of the first feminists to call attention to the "lot of the Black slave woman, who compelled by circumstance to labor alongside Black men, was a living embodiment of truth that women could be the working equals of men" (Marble, 1990, p.407). With respect to racism, Scales-Trent (1990) suggested that Black women's struggle for the right to vote is a compelling illustration of the impact of the combined racist and sexist oppression they endured. Black women's source of political powerlessness was attributable to two factors- their positionality in both the Black and female groups which resulted in tem having to fight-even in the 21st century-for social, political, and economic parity.

Hence, the case of the Black woman in America is very special. The circumstances of whether serving in the slave owner's house or working in the plantation fields, the Black woman remained easy prey with few defenses (Hazzard, 1982). Yet, it was the Black woman who held the Black slave family together often without the aid and companionship of a Black male. In her role as mother and provider often for her own children and the children of others, the Black female slave became educator as well. According to Hazzard (1982), historical documents reveal that it was not uncommon for a slave woman to use the late night hours after work to study a "purloined spelling book or dictionary" in an effort to learn to read and write. Denied the opportunity for a formal education and fearful that their White owners would punish them for having educational aspirations, many black mothers feigned ignorance and taught their children to do the same and at the same time sought to lean and teach as much as possible (Hazzard, 1982). Viewing education as the "road to freedom" (Peterson, 1996) many Black women as slaves and emancipated slaves were encouraged to become educated to 'lift' their race out of educational and economic subjugation. In fact, "the notion of 'race uplift' was the expected objective of *all* educated Blacks; however, after the Civil War, the implementation if this philosophy was place primarily on the shoulders of Black women" (Allen, 1997; Perkins, 1993). According to Perkins, unlike women of White society, Black women were encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of their race. Perkins quotes from an 1837 article entitled 'To Females of Colour' in *The Weekly Advocate*, a New York Black newspaper urging Black women to get an education for the 'uplift' of the race. The articles states,

Black women to obtain an education... in an enterprise for the improvement of our people, either moral or mental, our hands would be palsied without woman' influence... let our beloved female friends, then, rouse up, and exert all their power, in

encouraging, and sustaining this effort (educational) which we have made to disabuse the public mind of the misrepresentations made of our character; and to show the world, that there is virtue among us, though concealed; talent, though buried; intelligence, though overlooked (Perkins, 1993, p. 266).

To carry out this charge, promote and demonstrate the race's intelligence, morality and ingenuity (Perkins, 1993), Black women like Charlotte Forten Grimke, Ida B. Wells, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer made significant contributions to this end as activists and educators who embodied teaching as a leadership style that focused on the development of others.

Biographical Summaries of Historical and Contemporary Black Women Educators

Charlotte Forten Grimke

Charlotte Forten Grimke "provides one of the best nineteenth century examples of a life devoted to a personal quest for knowledge and selfless service to the race" (Hazzard, 1982, p. 277). Her life and career covered a period when the lives of Black men and women in America underwent momentous changes, the experience, challenges, and opportunities she faced were intimately connected with those of her race (Hazzard, 1982). Grimke was exposed to the abolitionist cause at an early age due to her grandfather, father, and two aunts' abolitionist work. After being denied admission to White schools in Philadelphia, she was sent to Salem, Massachusetts to live with a prosperous Black family, the Remond's. Mr. Remond was a noted antislavery lecturer, which again exposed her to the abolitionist cause (Peterson, 1996). As a result, Grimke developed a strong desire to find ways to help fight against the injustices Blacks were suffering at the time. On way of accomplishing this was to become a teacher. Grimke undertook study in the Salem Normal School and a year later became the first Black teacher at the Salem Eps Grammar School. After two years and failing health, Grimke returned to Philadelphia for a brief period in 1861 to teach school with her Aunt Margaret. With health complications following here there too, she moved back to Salem and involved in what is considered by some, the first unofficial federally funded adult education project, the Port Royal Experiment (Peterson, 1996).

The purpose of the experiment was two-fold: to prove that former slaves had intellectual ability and to expose the bravery of Black soldiers in combat. Grimke as the only Black instructor along with other teachers struggled to teach math, reading, and writing to children and adults in the same classroom (Peterson, 1996). Although she was hired to teach, "Grimke considered her task also one of instilling self-pride, self-respect and self-sufficiency" (Hazzard, 1982, p. 278). Although the conditions for learning were unfavorable and supplies were inadequate, Grimke managed to impart a rudimentary program of instruction. She also managed to fulfill a long-cherished dream-to share stories of great Black men and women with her pupils as a source of pride and inspiration. Once again, due to health complications, Grimke left Port

Royal in 1864 to assume teaching positions in Massachusetts, then Charleston, and finally in Washington DC at Preparatory High School. At age forty-one, she married Reverend Francis Grimke and spent the rest of her life remaining active by writing letters to newspapers and journals,

Ida B. Wells Barnett

Ida B. Wells Barnett was an educator and a social activist. She formed her first class as a child in her father's store, teaching any Black child or adult who wanted to learn (Thompson, 1990). While a student at age sixteen beginning collegiate level work at Shaw University, Barnett's parents were stricken with yellow fever thus leaving her responsible for her five younger brothers and sisters. She as a result, curtailed her college career to accept a teaching position in Memphis, Tennessee (Thompson, 1990). With the knowledge she had acquired at Shaw, she passed the examination required for country schoolteachers. She later secured a teaching job in Woodstock in Shelby County, Tennessee which paid her a higher salary. She then prepared to take the city schoolteacher examination. "It was here also that had her first experiences of 'Jim Crowism' and began her career of protest" (as cited in Thompson, 1990, p.13).

Barnett became heavily involved in advocating for the exposure of crimes against Blacks, especially lynching. While serving as editor of the *Free Speech* in Memphis in which she wrote about the unjust lynching of Black males, she began receiving violent threats against her life, which lead to the termination of her teaching position. Thompson (1990) reports that Barnett left Memphis in 1892 because she wanted to continue her journalism career in New York and Chicago.

Moreover, in 1895, she published *The Red Record*, which was the first statistical analysis of lynching in the United States. She became a virtual crusader against lynching and a staunch advocate of women's rights. In this vein, she along with other women leaders with a pioneering spirit, initiative, courage, and perseverance helped women to organize themselves to form clubs and organizations on the local and national level (Wesley, 1984). Barnett contributed greatly to the development of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs; she served on national committee denouncing the lynching of Blacks, especially women. In 1898, she accompanied a delegation of Illinois congressional representatives to present a protest to President William McKinley stating the statistics had shown that nearly 10,000 American citizens had been lynched in the previous twenty years (Wesley, 1984). Barnett also traveled around the country as a lecturer expressing her "conviction that the nation's indifference and apathy about the primitive practice of shooting, hanging, and burning persons without recourse to law were due to ignorance of mob action in the South" (Thompson, 1990, P.35). She explained that she assumed the task of crusader against lynching not because she had a natural inclination to recite its horrors, but because she had witnessed society's need to be informed about it (Hazzard, 1982).

Ida B. Wells Barnett's youthful experience as guardian and provider for five siblings was preparation for the independence and determination that she exhibited throughout her life. Barnett's anti-lynching crusade branded her with the title, "agitator" and thus enabled her to influence the making of anti-lynching laws. Although Barnett never completed college, she continued taking classes that would enhance her intellectual skills. It is through her leadership as an activist, model of resilience, her respect and love of education and teaching, youth and adult and the power of her journalism skill, which helped her to improve the lives of many African Americans for years to come.

Septima Poinsette Clark

A native of Charleston, South Carolina and born in 1898, Clarke is recognized as a leading educational, social, and political activist. Teaching was one of the few professions available to Black women at the beginning of the twentieth century, Clark took the state examination in 1916 after having completed the twelfth grade at Avery Normal institute in Charleston, South Carolina and secured a teaching position at Johns Island (McFadden, 1990), a sea island near the harbor of Charleston (Easter, 1996). She remained on the island for three years during which time she became a "crusader for the equalization of teachers' salaries as well as an active proponent for Black teachers being able to teach in Charleston's public school and becoming public school principals" (McFadden, 1990, p. 86).

Clark's civil rights work began in 1919 when she returned to Charleston to teach at Avery Normal Institute, her old high school. During this time, she worked closely with the president of the NAACP to generate support for Black teachers to teach in public schools for Blacks. Their efforts among others persuaded the legislature to pass a law in 1920 granting them this right (Easter, 1996). While in Charleston, Clark married and had two children and then separated from her husband who later died. Clark moved to Columbia, South Carolina and began her most famous work in citizenship education.

During her years in Columbia, she helped design citizenship training programs for illiterate soldiers stationed at Camp Jackson (now Fort Jackson) following World War I. (McFadden, 1990). According to McFadden (1990), the programs trained soldiers to sign their names to pay slips, read bus routes, and learn to count. Clark's ability to link social reform with educational advancement became the basis for the Citizenship Schools she designed at Highlander Folk School and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (McFadden, 1990).

Clark worked in the Charleston public schools from 1947 to 1956. After being fired for refusing to conceal her membership in the NAACP, she turned adversity to her advantage by accepting the position of director of workshops for the Highlander Folk School and she later joined the SCLC staff as director of education and training in 1961. Clark essentially spent her time providing citizenship training, voting, literacy,

and leadership education (McFadden, 1990)-teaching people how to obtain political power. As a social activist, Clark also advocated for the training of women in citizenship education. She believed it helped women to realize their worth in society. Although this was not the goal of the training schools, Clark however contended that women who participate in citizen education become aroused citizens and assumed positive roles in quest for civil as well as women's rights (McFadden, 1990).

Clark's leadership roles with the NAACP, Highlander Folk School, and CLS had tremendous influence on her personally and professionally. She served as the first Black female elected to the Executive Board of SCLC and the first Black woman elected to the same school board in Charleston that did not renew her teaching contract (Easter, 1996). Like Hamer, Clark brought America one step closer to dismantling the barriers keeping African Americans on the periphery of political involvement. Through education and the power of their leadership within the Black community, they and other Black female adult educators were able to reach the poor and underprivileged as a means to help them raise themselves to better status in life (Easter, 1996).

Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer, born in 1917, as the twelfth child of a Mississippi sharecropper family, brought America face to face with itself-it's racism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred, and hypocrisy (Locke, 1990, p. 27). After experiencing at a young age and witnessing her parents' experiences with racism, she grew up determined to change the unequal and discriminatory practices directed toward Blacks. As a young political advocate, Hamer became a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Conference (SNCC) in 1962. In defying laws and political mores of Mississippi, she was launched into a life that would remain politically active until her untimely death in 1977 at the age of fifty-nine (Locke, 1990). One important aspect of her life is her legacy in the formation in 1964 and activities of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) (Locke, 1990).

With Hamer's leadership, the Freedom party developed a national reputation challenging the seats of the all-white Mississippi delegation because Blacks were not allowed to exercise their rights as citizens to participate in electoral politics in that state (Reagon, 1990, p. 215). When the MFDP began a slow descent into obscurity, it left its mark on national Democratic Party politics. More important, it catapulted to fame a magnificent woman who sought to expose America's hypocrisy and dispel the image of America being the land of the brave and the home of the free. She sought to transform the ideal into reality. Through MFDP and other grass roots efforts, Fannie Lou Hamer brought America one step closer to dismantling the barriers keeping African Americans on the periphery of political involvement. This strong, invincible woman, without benefit of formal education, showed the country that knowledge, wisdom, and organizational skills did not come with the acquisition of a formal degree (Locke, 1990).

As Hamer states, “whether you have a Ph.D., D.D., or no D., we’re in this bag together” (Locke, 1990, p. 35). Hamer was more than a talker, organizer, and singer; her efforts brought results. For example, when she failed the literacy test the first times she tried to register to vote she told the registrar that she would return every thirty days until she passed the test, and she did (Locke, 1990).

Hamer was an activist and a cultural leader who assumed major responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the environment within which those who struggle for freedom lived and worked (Locke, 1990). She positioned herself so that she was constantly in great danger; she operated in the open, aboveground, confronting an entire system that was organized to keep her and all Black people subjugated (Reagon, 1990). When Ms. Hamer found her voice as a fighter, she became a transmitter of the culture of that struggle and urged others to join in battling racism poverty, and injustice. As a leader in the movement and in her community, she did not hesitate to criticize men who wanted to lead but were unable to confront their fears (Reagon, 1990). She believed that leadership came from actual work and commitment and was not preordained by sex. She clearly stated her position on this when urging people to face the danger: “you see the thing what [is] so pitiful about it, the men [have] been wanting to be the boss all these years, and the ones not up under the house [are] *sic* under the bed” (Reagon, 1990, p. 213).

Fannie Lou Hamer, standing among a chorus of Black women leaders like Grimke and Septima Clark, taught something else about being a leader in the movement- these women made their political and social stances primary in their lives.

From the Past to the Present

Black women have contributed to African Americans’ educational advances not only at the familial and community level, but also by their “assumption of roles of leadership and influence in the policymaking and other administrative bodies which govern American education” (Hazzard, 1982, p. 316). In fact, the greatest numbers of elected Black women officials are educators. They have pioneered as commissioners, superintendents, and supervisors of education. Hine and Thompson (1998, p. 54) state it best, “more than a story of struggle, Black women’s history is very much a story of hope.” In the face of great obstacles, Black women strengthen their communities through providing leadership in women’s groups, charitable organizations, political groups and their contributions to the larger community as writers, activists, educators, and artists (Hine & Thompson, 1998).

As evidenced in the late 19th century, Ida B. Wells, notorious for her crusade against lynching, and other matriarchs like Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Charlotte Grimke helped to pave the way for many African American youth and adults to obtain quality secondary and post-secondary education advocating for and by helping to found schools and organizations for the personal and educational development of Black women and men (Giddings, 1984; McCluskey, 1994;

Murray, 2000). Similarly, literary scholars in the early 19th century, Mary Prince whose work published in 1831, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Story, Related to Herself*, and Mary Seacole’s 1837 work, *Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole*, were the first Black women to have their work published (Reynolds, 2002). They paved the way for what then followed a 131-year gap before any work by a Black woman was published (Reynolds, 2002). If it were not for these women’s leadership, contemporary Black scholars like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Paula Giddings would perhaps have had a longer wait to ascertain power to shift Black women’s lived experiences from the margins to the center of traditional literary scholarship.

Contemporary activist leaders like Rosa Parks who played a fundamental role in sparking the mass struggle for civil rights in the South; Coretta Scott King who carried and continued to carry her husband’s legacy into the 21st century; and Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to make a serious bid for the United States presidency in 1970, collectively forced America to no longer ignore and silence the reporting of Black women’s experiences, but to acknowledge their plight as manifestations of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. The work of the Black women aforementioned, alone, attests to the intellectual and political contributions Black women have made towards attaining equality, especially educational equality for Black Americans. Although Black women’s voices have been silenced for centuries they did not sit idle waiting for the dominant culture to release its hold on their intellectual rights.

They, instead, from their peculiar coigne of vantage [sat] as quiet observer[s],...whisper[ing] just the needed suggestion or the almost forgotten truth. The [Black] woman, then should not be ignored because her bark is resting in the silent waters of the sheltered cove... watching the movements of the contestants none the less and is all the better qualified, perhaps, to weigh and judge and advise because not herself in the excitement of the race. (Cooper, 2000, p. 93)

Cooper’s poignant prediction is reflected in the social and economic climax of the year 2012. The good news is that more scholarly attention is being devoted to studying and learning more about how Black women leaders used education as an empowering tool for activism, especially those who were adult educators (Imel & Bersch, 2015; Gaetane, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; Hopkins O’Neil, Passarelli, & Billmoria, 2008; King & Ferguson, 2001). The adult education field certainly benefits most from this new information such that its knowledge base is enriched with a more accurate picture of the contributions marginalized groups have made toward the field’s development. More importantly, as a field that promotes inclusivity it is our belief that students and scholars will be provided with a greater appreciation for the longstanding role adult education activities have had and continue to have in improving the quality of life for all people.

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