Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

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17. Black Women's Work: Resisting and Undoing Character Education and the 'Good' White Liberal Agenda

Bettina L. Love

Reclaiming Our Time

In early August 2017, a video of Maxine Waters — US Representative for Californian's 43rd congressional district — went viral when Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin tried to elude Waters' questioning by giving long-winded, convoluted, and irrelevant answers. Every time, and I mean every time, Mnuchin attempted not to answer Waters' initial question, she interrupted him and repeated the phrase: 'reclaiming my time.' Although the phrase is a documented rhetorical maneuver in the handbook of the *House Floor Procedure*, the words 'reclaiming my time' aimed at a powerful White man meant something more to people of color: how racism literally takes our time and the hard, never-ending work of reclaiming it.¹ Toni Morrison once said, 'The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps

1 Louise M. Slaughter, *House Floor Procedure*, 7 January 2019, https://archives-democrats-rules.house.gov/archives/floor_man.htm

you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being.²

Don't Believe the Hype

As a Black woman, I want to use Waters' words to think about the magnitude of time that has been taken from children of color, who grow up to be disillusioned adults because they believed in the American dream of meritocracy; and to explore whose work it becomes to undo the 'good White liberals' agenda, partially in the field of education. What I am describing may sound like racial hyperbole, but in June 2017 a study published in the journal *Child Development* found that youth of color from working-class families who grow up believing in America's narrative of hard work, perseverance, and grit — all components of the education of the White liberal character — are more likely to participate in risky behavior and have lower self-esteem.³ The study is grounded in the social psychology theory of 'system justification', which explains how humans believe, defend, and rationalize the status quo because they see social, economic, and political systems as fair and legitimate. For the low-income youth of color in the study, 91 percent believed in the 'American Dream.' While holding system-justifying beliefs, these youth lacked the skills to interpret a world that is, sadly, filled with intersectional, systemic oppression.

Erin Godfrey, the study's lead author, remarked on her team's findings in an article in *The Atlantic*: 'We cannot equivocate when it comes to preparing our children to face injustices.'⁴ Godfrey's study confirms what Black, Brown, and Indigenous people have always known: 'You cannot continue to oppress a consciously historical people.'⁵ If children of color are attending schools that do not help them

2 Toni Morrison, 'Black Studies Center Public Dialogue', Portland State, *Special Collections: Oregon Public Speakers*, 90 (1975), <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/orspeakers/90>

3 Erin B. Godfrey, Carlos E. Santos, and Esther Burson, 'For Better or Worse? System-Justifying Beliefs in Sixth Grade Predict Trajectories of Self-Esteem and Behavior Across Early Adolescence', *Child Development*, 90:1 (2019), 180–95; first published 2017, www.doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12854

4 Melinda D. Anderson, 'Why the Myth of Meritocracy Hurts Kids of Color,' *The Atlantic*, 27 June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/internalizing-the-myth-of-meritocracy/535035/>

5 John Henrik Clarke, *Africans at the Crossroads: African World Revolution* (Trenton: African World Press 1992), p. 36.

interpret the racist, sexist, Islamophobic, patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic and xenophobic world they are living in, then not only is the status quo maintained, but Whiteness is never disrupted; therefore, White supremacy stays on track.

What We Had

Before the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which found that separate schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional, Black schools were proud institutions that 'provided black communities with cohesion and leadership'.⁶ Black schools' facilities and books were inferior to their White counterparts, but not their education. Oral history interviews of Black teachers reflecting on Black schools before *Brown* consistently stated, 'black schools were places where order prevailed, where teachers commanded respect, and where parents supported teachers'.⁷ Educating Black children was viewed as the collective responsibility of the community, with schools as the anchors and teachers as leaders both inside and outside school walls. As schools desegregated, over 44,000 Black teachers and 90% of Black principals lost their jobs due to the closing of all-Black schools together with the fact that White parents did not want their children taught by a Black teacher. Legal scholar Derrick Bell has argued that Black people would have been better served if the court had rejected *Brown v. Board of Education* and enforced the 'equal' part of 'separate but equal'.⁸

Since *Brown*, educators of color, particularly women — since many more men of color than women were pushed out of the profession after *Brown* — have been trying to reclaim our time with our children and our community. School integration came at the cost of the collective ability of Black children and their communities to interpret, analyze, research, critique, and resist oppression. *Brown* opened the door for White racist normative standards concerning Black children's educational aims to become the pervasive marker of Black success. As a direct result of the *Brown* decision, an overwhelming majority (roughly 88 percent) of teachers in the United States are White women, and they walk into

6 Adam Fairclough 'The Costs of Brown: Black Teachers and School Integration', *The Journal of American History*, 91:1 (2004), 43–55.

7 Ibid.

8 Adam Fairclough, 'The Cost of Brown: Black Teachers and School Intergration', *The Journal of American History* 91:1 (2004), 43–55.

the classroom with little to no understanding of the longstanding fight by people of color against cultural genocide. Alongside some White allies (though not enough), women of color are fighting to undo what educational historian Joel Spring calls ‘ideological management’ that takes place in schools where cultural and linguistic genocide are masked as assimilation.⁹

Keep Swimming

Fig. 17.1 Jonathan Edwards, *Grit*, 2018. © Jonathan Edwards. All rights reserved.

In his book *Work Hard, Be Hard: Journeys Through 'No Excuses Teaching'* (2016), Jim Horn describes how most Boards of Directors of charter schools are typically comprised of wealthy philanthropists, representatives of corporate foundations, and Wall Street hedge fund managers who believe children of color need to learn discipline, character education,

⁹ Joel Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States* (New York: Routledge 2016), p. 178.

rudimentary academic skills, and full submission to white economic demands. These beliefs are not new nor are they egalitarian; they are the very fabric of America's racism. Ibram X. Kendi, author of *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016) writes, 'The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities.'¹⁰ No white liberal educational reform model, regardless of the era (i.e. Separate but Equal, *Brown v. Board of Education*, or No Child Left Behind), has promoted Black consciousness for resistance, self-determination, and/or empowerment. The model is for youth of color to keep swimming against the tide of systemic oppression while so-called 'good' character goals weigh them down, even as the sharks circle (i.e. gang violence, lack of jobs, being pushed out of school, and the intentional gutting of public housing). This is an education for survival, never to thrive or resist.

The single-minded narrative of character education, built on catchy buzzwords like grit, persistence, and zest, is not only racist, but undermines people of color's frustration, disappointment, anger, and determination to fight systemic oppression. For example, when reflecting on his school experiences, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes:

The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. Suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more [...] Educated children never offered excuses — certainly not childhood itself. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? [...] Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known.¹¹

As a former elementary school teacher and now a professor of education I know, sadly, the accuracy of Coates' piercing words. We cannot burn down schools; all we can do is undo what has already been done. Fortunately, there is a playbook for the undoing, and Black women wrote it.

10 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), p. 10.

11 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 16.

Black Women's Work

In this chapter I am going to focus on two civil rights icons and master teachers, Ella Baker and Septima Clark. Baker is a name unfamiliar to most people; however, she was one of the most courageous and brilliant civil and human rights activists of all time. She was a community organizer who worked from the premise that 'Strong people don't need strong leaders.'¹² Baker worked alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but never aspired to be a celebrity. She believed in grassroots community organizing, and became the first director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In the spring of 1960, after the Greensboro sit-ins, she founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to develop emerging activists as they did the work of the civil rights movement.¹³ Julian Bond, Bob Moses, Bernice Johnson-Reagon, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Marian Wright Edelman are all political protégés of Baker.¹⁴ She believed in the power of everyday people to transform society through leadership that was decentralized and non-hierarchical. Baker taught people to understand just how strong and brilliant they were, both individually and collectively, and stressed the idea of a radical democratic practice in which the oppressed, excluded, and powerless became active in positions of power with decision-making opportunities.¹⁵ Baker emphasized that people needed to understand their self-worth and be personally empowered before they could change systems of injustice. She believed in the power of people, all people, to fight for a just world.

Even fewer people know the name of Septima Clark. Dr. King called her 'The Mother of the Movement.' Clark was a master educator and activist, and developed the literacy and citizenship workshops that were the backbone of the voting rights and civil rights movements. Her 'Citizenship Schools' taught adults how to read by ensuring they felt invested in what they were learning. Her goal was not just for her students to be able to pass the literacy test to vote, but also to feed her students with cultural pride, personal pride, self-determination,

12 Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 3.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

leadership skills, and a deep understanding of their rights as citizens. Citizenship Schools were established inside homes, tents, beauty parlors, and of course, churches. Clark also trained other women to teach her approach to citizenship pedagogy, which she crafted while working as a teacher at the Highlander Folk School, an interracial adult education center in Tennessee.

According to Katherine Mellen Charron, author of *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (2009), citizenship pedagogy linked literacy with political and economic literacy, encouraging people to overcome their fear of white reprisals and accept the responsibilities of being a citizen leader in their community, with an understanding of the fundamental issues it faced. After attending Citizenship School, many students indicated that it was the 'First time I have felt like a human being.'¹⁶ Septima did not view citizenship as just about registering people to vote. Citizenship was a pedagogy of mattering: people acknowledging and accepting America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, and unjust; learning the socio-political landscape that characterised their communities and themselves; and lastly, everyday people engaging in civic education informed by radical democratic principles of shared leadership in the fight for humanity and intersectional justice.

Undoing

These two women understood how to systemically fight systemic oppression by providing people of color with a curated education focused on cultural pride, personal pride, self-determination, leadership skills, and harnessing the grit passed down by their ancestors. We need more like Ella and Septima to fight to reclaim the time we have lost in educating our children. We need an updated and contemporary Citizenship School. We cannot teach our children to take on White supremacy while being taught through the lens of Whiteness. Schools in the US have become more anti-Black, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay every day. Telling kids just to keep swimming, while they are drowning before our eyes, is educational malpractice.

16 Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 3.

We need to return to the work of Black women master-teachers who did not rely on gimmicks, acronyms, or buzzwords to chip away at one of the largest mountains of oppression: White supremacy. The education of children of color needs to be intentional, thoughtful, and conducted out of a love for Blackness and Black joy. The education our children receive now only prepares them to survive oppression, at best, because it is not their character that is being questioned, it is their Black skin and Blackness.

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