

# Discovering the Erased Feminism of the Civil Rights Movement

*Beyond the Media, Male Leaders,  
and the 1960s Assassinations*

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REPORTERS DEFINE NATIONAL traumas in ways that create and reinforce certain perceptions of leadership while eliminating others. During the 1960s, journalists generally explained the assassinations of prominent male leaders—specifically, Medgar Evers, President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy—as a series of shockwaves that propelled national horror and revulsion. For many people, the widespread identification of these figures as martyrs for racial equality has blocked any attempt to reassess events and discourse of the civil rights movement that occurred before the martyrdoms were completed. Yet such a reassessment is necessary if we are to understand race relations, gender relations, and social change.

Along with others in the academy, writing faculty often (usually implicitly) teach that historical opposition to racism and sexism involves two separate struggles. When teachers approach the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, they generally explain the nonviolent campaign simply as large-scale agitation for racial equality. This interpretation is evident, for example, in the teaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—works that often appear in freshman and sophomore textbooks. While presenting "I Have a Dream" and "Letter," faculty customarily erase

gender from the civil rights movement and treat anti-racism as a posture unrelated to feminist issues. But doing so perpetuates the illusion that one can understand race and racism without grappling with gender and sexism, even though the issues intertwine throughout the African American freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s.

We argue that, in order to teach the rhetoric of the civil rights movement effectively, faculty must recognize its female pioneers, the sexism that these women faced and often overcame, and the wholesale erasure of their efforts by the news media—an erasure that the press cemented in the popular imagination following the assassinations. In this essay we will review female leadership and explore the role of the news media in obscuring feminist issues during the struggle. We will also propose new ways to teach civil rights discourse, including “I Have a Dream.”

Consider a few of the many female trailblazers. In 1938, long before the civil rights movement supposedly began, a young woman named Pauli Murray tried to break racial barriers by applying for admission to the University of North Carolina. Two years later she was jailed for failing to move to the back of a bus. In 1944 she and three other activists led 50 demonstrators to sit-in and thereby integrate an all-white cafeteria in Washington, D.C. (Olson). Five years earlier, after the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) prevented a spectacular performance by Marian Anderson at Constitution Hall, Anderson protested the DAR's racism by singing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before an enormous throng. As Scott Sandage persuasively argues, Anderson's concert transformed the memory of Abraham Lincoln from national unifier to symbol of racial equality; her performance also christened the Lincoln Memorial as a site for African American protest. A year before Rosa Parks's famous arrest in 1955, JoAnn Robinson, Mary Fair Burks, and their Women's Political Council decried bus segregation in a letter to the Mayor of Montgomery, Alabama. Robinson and the Women's Political Council—not Martin Luther King, Jr.—initially orchestrated the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956 (Robinson; Garrow, *Bearing*). Daisy Bates exercised crucial, behind-the-scenes leadership in the 1957 crisis of school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1960, confronting the Mayor of Nashville before a large crowd, Diane Nash successfully pressured him to endorse lunch-counter integration (Lewis). The next year, after Freedom Riders were bloodied and hospitalized by white racist mobs in Alabama, Nash—at great risk of her own life—insisted on reviving the integrated bus rides—a protest that mortified President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy (Lewis). In 1963, by directing demonstrations in Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson prodded the Kennedy Administration to protect racial agitators from retaliation by white racists—a move the brothers Kennedy had not made in earlier, similar situations (Olson). Fannie Lou Hamer, a long-time Mississippi sharecropper, survived police torture and became an extremely

energetic and outspoken activist with a public profile large enough to intimidate President Lyndon Johnson (Lee, Marsh, Payne, Reed). Amelia Boynton played a crucial role in spawning the 1965 voting rights protests in Selma, Alabama, and was beaten and tear-gassed by police (Garrow, *Protest*; Olson).

Even before Paolo Freire began his career in Brazil, other women, most notably Septima Clark, spearheaded Freire-like politicized literacy efforts as an important component of movement organizing in numerous states (Clark). Unarguably, Ella Baker was one of the most important figures of the entire civil rights movement. Working quietly, she recruited people to join the NAACP in the 1940s. Impressed with her courageous voyages to the Deep South and her relentless devotion to the cause, the NAACP promoted her to national director of its branches in 1943, a position she held until her resignation in 1946. In 1957 Baker, Stanley Levison, and Bayard Rustin founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which King headed. Baker remained a central figure in SCLC in 1958 and 1959, attempting, with few resources, to organize King's band of Baptist ministers—all of whom, following the pattern of their national church, were men. In 1960, disgusted with the paternalism, sexism, and inefficiency of King and his clergy, Baker resigned her SCLC post (Ransby, Grant).<sup>1</sup>

Baker decided that the ultimate hope for the movement lay with student activists. At a crucial 1960 meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, she helped create the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a grassroots organization of eager, young dissenters. King firmly suggested that the youths join SCLC and follow his leadership, but Baker urged them to secure autonomy from the "fathering" body. SNCC members agreed with Baker and refused to become a lower part of the SCLC hierarchy (Grant; Carson; Branch; Garrow, *Bearing*).

While Baker mentored many significant women in SNCC, she nurtured their abilities instead of dictating their actions. "My theory," she insisted, "is strong people don't need strong leaders" (qtd. in Cantrow and O'Mally 55). Although SNCC disdained hierarchy so much that, at times, it seemed leaderless, Baker and SNCC participants believed they would be more effective by remaining highly decentralized. One SNCC activist, Casey Hayden, describes Baker's practice of political organizing:

Ella was, politically, above all pragmatic. . . . Her notion of the need to raise up new leaders, and to rotate leaders, for example, was pragmatic, based on years of experience in seeing folks, when they became leaders, join the leaders' club and leave their constituents behind. (345)

Gently guided by Baker and the self-effacing Robert Moses, SNCC for four years functioned unlike any other group in the South. During the early 1960s SNCC—not King's SCLC—served as the largest and the most

important body of nonviolent civil rights agitators in the South. In Georgia, Alabama, and throughout Mississippi, SNCC sparked countless nonviolent workshops, sit-ins, marches, church rallies, and voter registration drives—many of which incorporated exciting speeches and jubilant songfests. White authorities often responded with violence, beating and jailing the enthusiastic, often joyful protestors. The linchpin of SNCC logistics was Ruby Doris Robinson, who coordinated much of the crusade from Atlanta (Fleming).

In his award-winning book about organizing in Mississippi—an enormously significant battleground for racial equality—Charles Payne devotes an entire chapter to explaining the painstaking efforts of SNCC to cultivate local leaders, most of whom were women and some of whom needed little or no cultivation (265–83). Payne observes that virtually everyone, including male SNCC organizers, readily noted that women fueled most of the movement in Mississippi. Women sometimes resorted to shaming their own ministers—who were male—into enlisting in the crusade. In Payne's words, "To SNCC members, the contemporary tendency to assume that movement leadership [in Mississippi] was basically ministerial is laughable" (196).

Some women were so dedicated to the movement that they either had no feminist concerns or subordinated those concerns for fear that wrestling with gender would detract from the crusade for racial integration. Because they were female and because they exerted crucial leadership by effectively resisting male domination (both within and outside the movement), we call such women proto-feminists. Baker and others, however, resisted patriarchal hierarchy in general and in the movement. Not only were these women outright feminists, but they also played significant roles in pioneering the entire Second Wave of American feminism (Evans).

Although Baker, Hamer, Ruby Doris Robinson, and many other women exerted important leadership in SNCC, the organization was not immune to sexism. In 1964, at a retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, Casey Hayden and Mary King (with the help of Emmie Schrader and Elaine DeLott) drafted a position paper to air their grievances. Writing anonymously, these women declared:

The average white person finds it difficult to understand why the Negro resents being called "boy," or being thought of as "musical" or "athletic," because the average white person doesn't realize that he assumes he is superior. And naturally he doesn't understand the problem of paternalism. So too the average SNCC worker finds it difficult to discuss the woman problem because of the assumption of male superiority. Assumptions of male superiority are as wide-spread and deep-rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro. (qtd. in Cagin and Dray 424)

These women urged SNCC to change "so that all of us gradually come to understand that this is no more a man's world than it is a white world" (qtd. in Carson 148). Other women in SNCC supported this position while most men in SNCC dismissed the women's protest.

The sexism of Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and other male civil rights figures was evident in 1963 at the March on Washington, a day-long event that King capped with "I Have a Dream." Speakers at the March included Roy Wilkins of NAACP, John Lewis of SNCC, Walter Reuther of United Auto Workers, Eugene Blake of the National Council of Churches, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, and Jewish leader Joachim Prinz—several of whom could hardly be considered civil rights agitators at all. Until Lynne Olson's magnificent book *Freedom's Daughters* appeared in 2001, almost no one, including historians of the period, knew that Anna Arnold Hedgeman—the only woman on the 19-member planning council for the March on Washington—seriously attempted to secure a speaking role for a woman—any woman—at the March. Although Hedgeman complained (first politely, then loudly) about the exclusion of female speakers from an occasion that promised to be (and was) a media spectacular, her protest fell on deaf ears. No woman spoke at the March (Olson 284–85).

Preceding it by two days was an address by A. Philip Randolph, the official head of the March, at the National Press Club. Though the club had recently admitted black men, it still denied women the right to join and actually confined the female reporters covering Randolph's speech to its balcony (Olson 287). Pauli Murray was so incensed at this display that she quickly penned a letter to Randolph where her feelings would not be misinterpreted or silenced:

I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing at the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership to which they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions. (qtd. in Olson 288)

A month earlier Murray objected to separating the twin goals of racial and gender equality: "What does it profit me personally to fight fifty years of my life for the civil rights of Negroes only to have to turn around and fight another fifty years so that I and my sex may benefit from the earlier struggle?" (qtd. in Olson 286).

Reflecting a white, male bias similar to that of the National Press Club, the predominately white, male news media largely ignored the long African American protest tradition after the Civil War, including early 1950s nonviolent agitation in Louisiana that was met with racist violence (Fairclough).

Such wholesale neglect made possible the decision of the press to christen the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956 as the birth of a new crusade for racial justice. Entirely neglecting JoAnn Robinson and the Women's Political Council, the media catapulted King into national prominence. For the remainder of the civil rights era, newspaper and television editors covered the movement by dispatching almost exclusively male reporters to the South, reporters who erased Baker-style group decision-making and attributed leadership to individual men, especially King (Olson).

Even when King followed SNCC into places where its workers had been organizing for months—most notably Selma, Alabama, in 1965—the press frequently failed to notice that he was trailing SNCC and immediately proclaimed him the head of the Selma campaign for voting rights. Many in SNCC resented the effect of King's scintillating oratory in mesmerizing and monopolizing the news media, which in turn created the widespread, but entirely erroneous impression that all civil rights protestors worked under his direction. Rather than venerate King, some SNCC workers regarded him as an interloper and mocked him as "De Lawd." For her part, Baker observed, "Martin didn't make the movement. The movement made Martin" (qtd. in Garrow, *Bearing* 625).

Granted, during the early 1960s, reporters were wrestling with the complex racial dynamics of an unprecedented, large-scale, nonviolent uprising in the South that almost no one had anticipated. Unfortunately, however, by constructing the movement as a male-led fight for racial justice, the media erased both crucial female figures and the complications of gender within what the press often depicted as a campaign guided by a singular Great Man of History. While women of the civil rights movement were confronting the billy clubs of segregationist police, the possibility of being raped by police or Klansmen, and sexism within and outside the movement, journalists were rendering them invisible.

Any chance the agitating women had of gaining great national attention disappeared following a series of assassinations. Dramatized by the relatively new medium of television, several tragic murders stunned the nation: Medgar Evers, head of the NAACP in Mississippi, killed in 1963; black nationalist Malcolm X gunned down in 1965; and King slain in 1968. Even though the civil rights records of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were decidedly mixed, their victimage by assassins' bullets, in 1963 and 1968, respectively, also enshrined them as champions of racial equality. An inestimably immense press coverage defined these killings as cataclysmic national traumas, earthquakes fissuring the landscape. Sympathetic to the cause of racial equality, journalists sculpted marble images of the martyred leadership of Evers, King, and the Kennedys, images that were rhetorically unassailable.<sup>2</sup> When the press monumentalized the Kennedys and King, it relegated even other pivotal male leaders of the movement—including Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph,

Robert Moses, Aaron Henry, John Lewis, Fred Shuttlesworth, and James Farmer—to the status of bit players in a highly theatrical, televised drama.<sup>3</sup> The media fixed its images of Evers, Malcolm X, King, and the Kennedys into a frozen tableaux.

A well-known image in this tableaux is 250,000 marchers listening to King unfurl “I Have a Dream” from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where Marian Anderson had sung 24 years earlier. National and international television and radio beamed King’s speech to millions of listeners, who ranged from starving sharecroppers in Mississippi to Harvard-educated John F. Kennedy in the White House. Like many who had delivered African American jeremiads before him—including Frederick Douglass, Francis Grimke, Ida B. Wells, and Archibald Carey, Jr.—King embraced Lincoln, marshalled astute Biblical quotations, and cited the Declaration of Independence. Like Wells and Carey, he closed by repeating the lyrics of “America” and, like Carey, by expanding those lyrics in his “Let Freedom Ring” conclusion (Vander Lei and Miller).<sup>4</sup> King also echoed rhythms and reimagined grand, yet simple metaphors common to many African American spirituals and gospel lyrics (Miller, “Beacon”). But, as was his custom, he never directly mentioned gender.

In order to teach “I Have a Dream” effectively, teachers should examine its entire context, not simply the verbiage. Faculty need to ask: Why has so little ever been mentioned about the women present at the March on Washington? Why were no women allowed to speak? Why did reporters not notice their absence? Why were the journalists men? Why did women complain or not complain to the news media? Who made the decision that no women would speak? And who, if anyone, should ever have that right?

Teachers should prompt students to examine “I Have a Dream” (and/or “Letter from Birmingham Jail”) alongside other important texts that highlight significant gender issues during the heady days of the early 1960s.<sup>5</sup> These include the 1964 Waveland Position Paper by Casey Hayden and Mary King (Carson, Mary King); Anne Moody’s now classic autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; Hamer’s stunning testimony to the Credentials Committee at the 1964 Democratic Convention (Carson, Lewis); and *Deep in Our Hearts*, a recent collection of nine, fairly short autobiographies by Casey Hayden, Emmie Schrader Adams, Connie Curry, and other women who contributed notably to SNCC.

We especially urge teachers to pair “I Have a Dream” with “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo from Casey Hayden and Mary King to a Number of Other Women in the Peace and Freedom Movements,” which appeared in a 1966 edition of *Liberation*, a magazine for dissidents. This provocative essay calls for egalitarianism within progressive organizations, some of which, unlike Martin Luther King, Jr.’s SCLC, proclaimed themselves member-centered and democratic—principles fostered by Baker. Addressing a subject that

few men would admit was problematic, Casey Hayden and Mary King seek to illuminate the sexism that they thought was "straitjacketing" both genders. Highlighting gender discrimination in the Southern freedom struggle, "Sex and Caste" argues (1) that racism rests, in part, on self-serving claims about the erroneously alleged biological basis for the erroneously alleged intellectual differences between one race and another and (2) that sexism rests, in part, on self-serving claims about the erroneously alleged biological basis for the erroneously alleged intellectual differences between men and women. Hayden and Mary King thus strongly imply that racism and sexism intertwine and reinforce each other—a contention quite foreign to King. The authors hope that individuals most appalled by racial inequality would consider gender inequality equally unacceptable.

In contrast to "I Have a Dream," the audience for "Sex and Caste" consisted of other volunteers in the freedom struggle—not the general public. The authors never fantasized that they would be televised. Nurtured by Ella Baker, Casey Hayden and Mary King did not want their essay to move millions or to be authoritative or final. "Sex and Caste" does not allude to any historical figures, reference the Bible, or resort to highly elevated language. One might ask: why bring into the classroom an essay that lacks eloquent phrasing and literary wordsmithing? Why introduce something that is not a sublime monument, but rather a part of a conversation in process, an attempt to provoke "dialogue" within the movement?

Consider the beginning of "I Have a Dream." Standing a few feet in front of Daniel Chester French's gigantic marble sculpture of a brooding Abraham Lincoln, King started his second sentence with the phrase "Five score years ago," an echo of the first line of the Gettysburg Address. He then hailed the Emancipation Proclamation as a "momentous decree that came as a great beacon light of hope" following "a long night of captivity." He warned that, despite Lincoln's magnificent edict, oppression continued: "But one hundred years later the Negro still is not free." This powerful evocation of Lincoln—and portrait of emancipation of a yet-to-be-completed project—frames the entire speech.

Now consider the subtitle of "Sex and Caste." Instead of commencing with a grand, sermonic pronouncement about American history, Casey Hayden and Mary King announce that they are writing not an essay, but what they modestly title a "memo"—rather, not even a "memo" but merely "a kind of memo." Their first paragraph is unimposing:

We've talked a lot, to each other and to some of you, about our own and other women's problems in trying to live in our personal lives and in our work as independent and creative people. In these conversations we've found what seem to be recurrent ideas or themes. Maybe we can look at these things many of us perceive, often as a result of insights learned from the movement. (1)

Their aim is simply to bring to a larger group the concerns raised in private conversations, not by one or two, but by a number of organizers. Further, they credit not their own genius, but the movement itself—to which all their readers obviously devoted themselves—with fostering insights about race and gender. They finish their first paragraph by saying, "Maybe we can look at these things. . . ." The use of "maybe" qualifies every single statement in the rest of their "kind of memo," masking their assertive ideas in humility and possibly making those ideas more palatable to male readers.

While Casey Hayden and Mary King conclude by suggesting a far-reaching goal—the eradication of racism and sexism in favor of a "new alternative" for race and gender—the patient, gentle tone of their first paragraph is evident throughout their whole essay. Consider the modesty that characterizes their final sentence: ". . . we'd like to see the discussion begin. . . ." The authors' unobtrusive manner contrasts quite starkly with that of "I Have a Dream," which most definitely does not include the word "maybe" or any other self-effacing hedges.

Having heard "I Have a Dream" many times, students often favor it over "Sex and Caste." At least at first. Then, inevitably, someone mentions gender equity. Because students are often uncomfortable with criticizing an American icon, the discussion begins with much trepidation. Eventually they begin to dissect the rhetoric of both the speech and the article, explaining why they like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rich metaphors, anaphoras, and quotations—and his passion for racial equality—but can also appreciate the inviting informality of Casey Hayden and Mary King. We suggest prodding students to analyze which argument and which approach they find more persuasive and why. Ask: In addressing a massive national audience, does a writer, an orator, or a whole social movement gain a signal advantage by largely focusing on a single evil, such as segregation? Can a nation repeal racism without addressing sexism, as W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X assumed? Or are racism and sexism so tightly interwoven that progressives must target both, as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Frances E.W. Harper, Pauli Murray, Casey Hayden, and Mary King did? Does discourse need to be high sounding and authoritative to be effective, or should it be openly dialogic instead? Should speakers and writers definitively proclaim "truths" or ask audiences to join them in a search? Should teachers ask each student to produce writing that argues vigorously for a very specific solution to a problem? Or should students kindly invite readers to explore complex dilemmas and possible solutions? When should a writer's tone be insistent and conclusive? When should a writer construct a persona that is well-informed, but unassuming?

In their unobtrusive manner, Casey Hayden and Mary King also protest women's inability to locate a forum for the discussion of sexism: "Nobody is writing, or organizing or talking publicly about women, in any way that

reflects the problems that various women in the movement come across and which we've tried to touch above."

Nearly 40 years after this essay was anonymously submitted, our classrooms can become such a forum. As educators we have not only the opportunity to discuss "Sex and Caste" along with "I Have a Dream," but we also have the obligation to tackle issues that "Sex and Caste" introduces. We can foster dialogue by providing classrooms in which students are comfortable discussing the relationship between racism and sexism. This notion goes hand-in-hand with Baker's philosophy about how to run a political organization, a philosophy that can help teachers develop more democratic classroom practices. Sitting alongside students can help teachers foster an atmosphere in which students guide each other as they wrestle with assertive and unimposing forms of argumentation.

When we teach "I Have a Dream" without mentioning gender, we further reinforce and extend the media erasure of feminist issues within the civil rights community of the early and middle 1960s. Presenting "Sex and Caste" alongside "I Have a Dream," on the other hand, means beckoning students to complicate and interrogate "I Have a Dream" and to find a usable past in 1960s politics beyond the press-defined memories of national trauma occasioned by the assassinations of highly visible, nonfeminist male leaders. Casey Hayden and Mary King longed for a site where race and gender could be openly discussed; as educators we have not only the opportunity but also the obligation to create such a forum.

In an attempt to recover and reassert the many, long-neglected heroes of the African American freedom struggle, educators need to look beyond shopworn interpretations of "I Have a Dream" and beyond familiar images of national trauma associated with male martyrs. Once students become acquainted with women like Pauli Murray, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Casey Hayden, and Mary King, they will develop a greater understanding of the complex relationship between race and gender. Teaching the movements toward racial equality and women's equality as inextricably related will help students comprehend and value these intertwining phenomena.

## NOTES

1. Dorothy Cotton, who was for some time the highest-ranking woman in SCLC, also observed the male chauvinism of King and other SCLC leaders. See Cotton.
2. For a selection of the best journalism of the movement for racial justice, see Carson et al.
3. For Rustin, see Levine. For Randolph, see Pfeffer. For Farmer, see his autobiography. For Shuttlesworth, see Manis and McWhorter. For Moses, see Payne.

4. At her renowned concert of 1939, Marian Anderson sang "America" ("My country 'tis of thee"). She also performed at the March on Washington. See Miller and Lewis.

5. For perspectives on "Letter," see Bass; McWhorter; Manis; and Miller, *Voice*. Bass argues that King caricatured the clergy to whom he addressed "Letter," agglomerating them into a single straw figure.

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