Este capítulo forma parte del libro:

Mosaico feminista
Tejiendo conocimiento a través de las culturas
Feminist Mosaic
Weaving Knowledge Across Cultures

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(Coordinadora)

editorial.uaa.mx

libros.uaa.mx

revistas.uaa.mx

libreriavirtual.uaa.mx

Número de edición: Primera edición electrónica

Editorial(es):

- Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes

País: México

Año: 2024

Páginas: 490 pp.

Formato: PDF

ISBN: 978-607-2638-05-1

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.33064/UAA/978-607-2638-05-1

Disponible en:
https://libros.uaa.mx/uaa/catalog/book/363

A Revolutionary Pedagogy of Resistance: Black Women Teachers as Activists

Alexis V. Bigelow

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our "minds" [...] Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial.

bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

Education as a Practice of Freedom

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire argues that students should receive a problem-posing education. Problem-posing education responds to consciousness where students are presented with problems related to the world (Freire 1968). This form of education involves a constant revealing of reality. Education becomes a practice of freedom rather than domination. Students are encouraged to analyze the world and society critically. A problem-posing education is inherently anticolonial because it forces students to question the status quo and reflect on actions that influence social change.

Historically, many Black women teachers have held a critical orientation to teaching and provide a problem-posing education to their students. During the antebellum era, enslaved Black women created night schools and hid in ditches to practice reading and writing. Black women teachers were foundational to the abolitionist movement (Neal and Dunn 2020). Free Black women secretly taught enslaved African Americans to read and write in their homes. During reconstruction, Black women were active in freedpeople schools and African American teacher associations and clubs.[1] Black women provided a classical education to newly freed African Americans in freedpeople schools; they used teacher associations and clubs to advocate for Black students' right to a quality education.[2] Black women teachers were also critical actors during the Civil Rights Era. Black women created curriculums focused on the Civil Rights Movement, incorporated Black literature into their pedagogy and invited leaders of the Civil Rights Movement into their classrooms.[3] Presently, Black women teachers draw on generational practices and understandings of activist teaching. They do this by teaching citizenship and facilitating conversations on race and racism in society.[4]

Black women teachers have a track record of using education to support the advancement of Black students. Across multiple decades, Black women have taught in a manner that creates students to become, as bell hooks states *"black folks who used their minds"* (hooks 1994, 2). In the wake of the passing of feminist theorist and champion of Black women teachers, bell hooks, it is appropriate to examine the pioneers of activist teaching, Black women.

In this critical essay, I provide a general analysis of what bell hooks refers to as a *revolutionary pedagogy of resistance* enacted by Black women teachers. First, I discuss womanism, the theoretical framework that grounds Black women's orientation to teaching. Following that exposition, I provide my own interpretation of revolutionary pedagogy of resistance. I then historicize Black women teachers engaging in a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance. Finally, I conclude with a discussion summarizing my findings.

Womanism

Derived from the term Womanist, coined by Alice Walker, Womanism is a framework used to examine the social realities of Black women.[5] Due to Black women's interlocking identities, womanism

focuses on the effects of economic exploitation, sexism and racism Black women have experienced throughout their history in the United States.[6] Womanism seeks to reveal the experiences, thoughts and behaviors of Black women and argues three points. First, it posits that oppression is an interlocking system (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2005). Specifically, Black women hold many social identities providing each individual with varying levels of oppression and privilege. Second, Womanism places emphasis on resistance. Individual and collective action are central to social transformation and the redistribution of power. Lastly, Womanism embraces humanism, which acknowledges the dignity and value of all humankind. Therefore, Womanism seeks the liberation and enfranchisement of all humans regardless of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Black women often ground their pedagogy and orientation to teaching within a womanist tradition. Black womanist teachers learn from traditions of female activism (Ramsey 2012). Their former Black women teachers acted as "tricksters and quiet revolutionaries" (Ramsey 2012, 437). Black womanist teachers consider themselves beholden to family and cultural examples of female agitators. Black women teacher's womanist orientation is grounded in three womanist stances (a) embrace of a maternal sensibility; (b) political clarity; and (c) an ethic of risk.[7]

Where I enter

It is important for every scholar to disclose their positionality and share how they enter into their work. For me, I enter as a former third grade teacher to Black children. As a Black teacher teaching Black children, I brought a specific political orientation to my work. My classroom fostered a sense of urgency and familial ethos. My duties as a teacher extended outside the classroom. I frequently visited students at their houses, met with parents at coffee shops, took students to dinner and various extracurricular activities. My lived experiences have fostered an understanding that many Black women teachers engage with Black students in a specific and distinctive manner that communicates care, love, and accountability.

Revolutionary Pedagogy of Resistance

Black women's pedagogy of resistance is comprised of three components: (a) womanist tradition of caring and mothering; (b) cultural knowledge; and (c) political clarity. First, Black women's pedagogy of resistance is grounded in a Womanist tradition of caring and mothering.[8] Womanism centers the social realities of Black women in slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation. Foundational to Womanism is its recognition in how Black women are central to the survival of the Black community. Black women's politicized mothering has aided in the survival of the Black community. Maternal traditions inform activist teaching practices. Black women teachers often take on the role as surrogate parents commonly referred to as *othermothers* to their Black students (Dixson 2003). In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Black Women Teachers and Professional Socialization*, Adrienne Dixson and Jeaninne Dingus (2008) assert that other mothering is located within a tradition of professional service in order to impart culturally and familial-based ideas, values and behaviors. Teaching allows for the maintenance of cultural traditions. This politicized mothering allows for Black women to act as gate-openers and dream-keepers for Black children. Therefore, Black women activist teachers are personally invested in Black children's success. Politicized caring is demonstrated in relationship building. Black women activist teachers hold an asset-based understanding of Black students and their families.[9] Black women activist teachers respect Black children and their communities and believe they are capable of achievement.

Second, cultural knowledge and experiences inform Black women's teaching strategies and interactions with Black students and their families. Black women hold diverse histories of gendered and raced oppression and discrimination. These histories push Black women to critically educate Black students because they understand the consequences of ignorance (Milner 2006). Black women are invested in teaching Black students because they empathize with the discrimination they face and view education as a means to improve the lives of the Black community. In effect, teaching is viewed as an honor and moral obligation.

A revolutionary pedagogy of resistance requires political clarity. Political clarity involves incorporating a critical perspective to the curriculum. Research demonstrates that Black women frequently facilitate discussions about discrimination and the sociopolitical and historical construction of inequality and engage in

practices rooted in racial pride.[10] Black women activist teachers feel a sense of responsibility for the African American community and racial uplift. This responsibility manifests in creating classroom environments where students feel safe, affirmed, and secure.

> *Racial uplift* has been at the core of historical intellectual debates looking closely at African American communities and strategies to promote equality and justice. Scholarship by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois represent the "must read" for a better understanding of these vital discussions (Moore 2003).

A revolutionary pedagogy of resistance is not solely teaching from a political standpoint. Black women include a specific maternal standpoint into their pedagogy and interactions with Black children. This maternal standpoint stems from a long lineage of Black women who dared to radically care for Black children. A revolutionary pedagogy of resistance embodies an interest and commitment in the Black community's survival. This form of teaching occurs at the intersection of both the personal and political.

Black Women and A Revolutionary Pedagogy of Resistance

Since enslavement, Black women have engaged in a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance. In "Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams: (Re) membering the Freedom Dreams of Black Women Abolitionist Teachers," Amber Neal and Damaris Dunn (2020) argued that Black women educators held *freedom dreams*. Specifically, Black women held alternative visions and articulations of hope for a free future. Black women strived for the realization of this future through hidden acts of resistance. Neal and Dunn discuss Lily Ann Granderson, an enslaved Black woman who operated a midnight school for enslaved children. The school operated from 11:00 pm to 2:00 am for 7 years. Granderson would teach 12 students at a time. Once the students learned to read and write, they *graduated* and Granderson enrolled 12 more students. Despite the dangerous consequences of literacy among African Americans, Granderson was determined to support Black children in their struggle for liberation.

Free Black women also used education as a tool to disrupt social power dynamics. Neal and Dunn argue that Black women teachers were foundational to the abolitionist movement. Charlotte Forten, a free Black woman, joined the Salem Female Antislavery Society. She taught formerly enslaved African Americans to read and write. Mary Smith Peake, a free Black woman, secretly taught enslaved and free African Americans to read and write in her home (Neal and Dunn 2020). These educators demonstrated *freedom dreams* of Black children as inherently brilliant and rejected the notion of Black inferiority. *Freedom dreams* is more than the title of a book by acclaimed historian Robin D. G. Kelley (2002), it is a moving invitation to African American educators. Kelley reflected in the last page of the preface of the inspirational book:

> I conceived *Freedom Dreams* as a preliminary effort to recover ideas—visions fashioned mainly by those marginalized black activists who proposed a different way out of our constrictions. I'm not suggesting we wholly embrace their ideas or strategies as the foundation for new movements; on the contrary, my main point is that we must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream.

Freedom dreams reflect the actions of both free and enslaved Black women educators: Black women dream of freedom and carve out spaces for liberation (Neal and Dunn 2020).

During the Reconstruction era [1863-1877], Black women activist teachers created freedpeople schools and teacher organizations and clubs to support Black children in obtaining a quality education (Siddle-Walker 2005). Freedpeople schools were designed for Black children and adults to obtain literacy (Williams 2007). Self-taught formerly enslaved African Americans with rudimentary literacy skills and classically trained free African Americans entered freedpeople classrooms as teachers, motivated by a sense of racial commitment (Vickery 2017). Black women were instrumental in providing an education that went beyond basic literacy. Black women accounted for the majority of Black teachers with more sophisticated literacy skills (Vickery 2017).

During the same period, resistance among Black women educators was primarily accomplished through their professional organizations. Black women campaigned for increased teacher salaries, longer school terms and equality of education opportunities for Black children. They critiqued inequality in school facilities

and encouraged bussing programs and vocational education opportunities. In addition, Black women worked alongside white educators to achieve educational equity. Black women wrote letters and petitions to their white superiors and attended meetings with white leadership (Siddle-Walker 2000). Interracial cooperation was significant in navigating state and national education systems and networks. Black women educators' actions were grounded in Womanism in that they used education and their social position to advance the Black community. Black women activist teachers rejected the status quo. They navigated institutional barriers to advocate for Black children and demanded that they have access to a quality education.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black women educators were vital in advancing the struggle for racial equality. Black women educators enacted a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance. They created curriculums that focused on the philosophy of the Civil Rights movement, foundations of Black history and literacy (Clemons 2014). Black women teachers used short stories, fables and folktales focused on achievement, dignity, character, and culture (Clemons 2014). They wore natural hair and displayed Black heritage themed pictures on their classroom walls (Loder-Jackson 2012). Black women educators insisted that Black literature be a part of the national high school English cannon. They incorporated Black literature into their own classrooms such as the book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Black women teachers were influenced by the courage, faith and strength illustrated by their mothers and ancestors to struggle for freedom and equality (Gyant and Atwater 1996). Black women teachers' pedagogy complimented social action outside the classroom. They transitioned schools into sites of struggle (Smith 2019). Black teachers explained the rationale behind protests, encouraged students to march in protests, focused history lesson on the Black American struggle for liberation and invited civil rights movement leaders into their classrooms.[11] Teachers informed students about Civil Rights protests and boycotts taking place and encouraged them to read black publications that covered these events (Givens 2021).

Presently, Black women teachers who identify with this tradition draw on generational practices and understandings of activist teaching. In a study by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Black women teachers reported locating themselves within the lineage of female activists and othermothers. Currently, Black women activist teaching can be found in their civic instruction. Black women emphasized and critiqued the concept of citizenship within their

classrooms.[12] Black women relate the idea of citizenship to relationships (Vickery 2017). Historically, African American communities have reframed citizenship as communal / community membership that recognizes cultural identity as integral to belonging (Vickery 2016). Black women educators use discussion as a tool for students to examine the social, political, and economic realities of the world and guide students in a critical examination of structures that disadvantage the Black community. These discussions influence Black children to be critical of blind patriotism.

Moreover, these women encourage students to adopt a communal understanding of citizenship and the world. Vickery discusses how Black women teachers encourage their classes to select a class name and engage in community-centered notions of citizenship (2017). They emphasize a relational sense of belonging and citizenship by sharing their experiences in historically Black sororities and women's clubs. Black women teachers share family histories of migration, racial terror, and trauma to their students. These histories provide students with concrete examples of how race impacts notions of citizenship within the United States. Black women teachers discuss the community service they completed through various women's clubs to their students. Black students watch their teachers and the politics they embody. Thus, Black students are positioned as students inheriting a tradition of protest through education (Givens 2021). Citizenship and civics education consistently focused on uplifting the Black community.

Discussion

"Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission," these are the inspirational words of bell hooks as she described her elementary school teachers (1994, 2). Her teachers, alongside many other Black women teachers, possess a missionary spirit and an expectation to use their skills, knowledge, and credentials for service to the Black community (Kelly 2010). This mission-like commitment to the Black race grounds the revolutionary pedagogy of resistance of Black women throughout history.

During the antebellum era, Black women teachers engaged in a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance by defying anti-literacy laws and teaching enslaved children to read and write. Despite the

threat of white violence and retaliation, they persisted and engaged in subversive actions to obtain an education. Granderson, Forten and Peake understood that literacy could disrupt the system of chattel slavey. Their actions demonstrate a politicized care and commitment to the Black community. They risked their lives for the possibility of racial advancement.

Throughout Reconstruction, Black women teachers engaged in a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance by demanding that Black children had a right and access to an education. Black women teachers taught Black children at freedpeople school. At the freedpeople schools' Black women introduced Black children to the liberal arts and affirmed their humanity. They rejected the notions that Black children were solely suitable for farming and catering to white society. Black women teachers prepared Black children to be active citizens in society. Alongside freedpeople schools, Black women advocated for social change in teacher associations and clubs. These associations and clubs supported Black women teachers in navigating the bureaucracy of the education system and gatekeeping efforts by white school leaders. Black women teachers were guided by the desire to vindicate the Black race and racial uplift.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black women exhibited a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance through connecting civic action occurring *outside* the classroom to the lived experience *inside* the classroom. Black women teachers discussed the philosophies of the Civil Rights movement, promoted protests occurring in their communities and invited leaders from the movement to speak in their classrooms. They strived for their classrooms to affirm Black children's identity and culture. Black women teachers were passionate in helping Black children understand social inequities and ways to address them. Rather than act as passive bystanders, Black women teachers were active participants in the Civil Rights Movement.

Presently, Black women teachers enact a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance through citizenship in praxis. Black women reframe citizenship from individual-centered to community-centered. Communal notions of citizenship manifests in Black women encouraging their students to engage in community service and community events. Community-centered citizenship is grounded in the idea of racial uplift. Black women teachers recognize the importance and significance in giving back. Black women hope to prepare future Black leaders that give back to the Black community. Therefore, the Black community will continue to thrive.

We are currently in an era of racial reckoning. Regarding the field of education, many administrators and teachers are grappling with how teachers can teach in a manner that is inclusive, affirming and empowering to all children. Many districts have turned to various interventions, professional developments and trainings focused on cultural competency. I urge schools to look to the history of Black women teacher's pedagogy. There you will find teaching that seeks to liberate and heal.

Notes

1. Baker, *Pedagogies of Protest.*
   Hale, *The Development of Power Is the Main Business of the School.*
   Harley, *Beyond the Classroom.*
   Siddle-Walker, *Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South, 1935-1969.*
   Siddle-Walker, *African American Teaching in the South.*
   Siddle-Walker, *Organized Resistance and Black Educators' Quest for School Equality, 1878 - 1938.*
   Siddle-Walker, *Tolerated Tokenism, or the Injustice in Justice.*
   Siddle-Walker and Archung, *The Segregated Schooling of Blacks in the Southern United States and South Africa*.
   Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom.*
2. Faith, *An 'Organized Body of Intelligent Agents,' Black Teacher Activism during De Jure Segregation*.
   Hale, *The Development of Power Is the Main Business of the School.*
   Harley, *Beyond the Classroom.*
   Siddle-Walker, *Organized Resistance and Black Educators' Quest for School Equality, 1878 - 1938.*
   Siddle-Walker, *Tolerated Tokenism, or the Injustice in Justice.*
3. Clemons, *I've Got to Do Something for My People.*
   Loder-Jackson, *Hope and Despair*.
4. Vickery, *I Worry about My Community.*
   Vickery, *You Excluded Us for so Long and Now You Want Us to Be Patriotic?*
   Vickery, *This Is a Story of Who America Is.*
5. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *A Womanist Experience of Caring*.
   Collins, *Black Feminist Thought.*
   Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.*
6. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *A Womanist Experience of Caring*.
   Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching.*

7. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *I Teach You the Way I See Us*.
   Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *A Womanist Experience of Caring*.
   Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching*.
   Dillard, *The Spirit of Our Work*.
   Henry, *African Canadian Women Teachers' Activism*.
   McKinnedy de Royston, *Black Womanist Teachers' Political Clarity in Theory and Practice*.
   Patterson, Mickelson, Hester, and Wyrick, *Remembering Teachers in a Segregated School*.
8. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *A Womanist Experience of Caring*.
   Henry, *African Canadian Women Teachers' Activism*.
9. Howell, Norris, and Williams, *Towards Black Gaze Theory*.
   Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*.
10. Howell, Norris, and Williams, *Towards Black Gaze Theory*.
    Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*.
11. Loder-Jackson, *Hope and Despair*.
    Smith, *Septima Clark Yelled*.
12. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.
    Preston-Grimes, *Fulfilling the Promise*.

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