



*Reflections*

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## Searching for Black Freedom in the South

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Frederick Douglass's quote, often printed in the classrooms at schools that serve predominantly Black and Brown students, says, "Once you learn to read, you will forever be free" (Douglass et al., 1845). The quote comes from Douglass's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which is frequently taught for school-aged children in excerpts to offer insight into life as an enslaved African in the United States. In urban school settings, the quote provides a double meaning as, on the one hand, urban school educators aim to promote the concept of education as a tool for freedom. On the other hand, the quote is used to encourage urban school youth to increase their academic progress in core subjects such as English/Language Arts, which is a common area for improvement for schools in urban settings. However, these two meanings miss an ever-important contextual mark that benefits Black K-12 youth and the overall Black community. Education as a tool for freedom is not a concept relegated to Black education, as it has roots in the work of educational theorist Paulo Freire, who called for a humanizing education that liberates oppressed groups. However, education as a form of freedom remains prevalent for Black education, secondary and post-secondary students, and adult learners. Historically, education quite literally impacted freedom for Black Americans.

Post-reconstruction, educational attainment was an aspect of rebuilding personhood and citizenship for Black Americans often undertaken by the Black community (Anderson, 1988). Yet, while Black Americans were striving to rise up after the many years of dehumanization through American slavery, White Americans and the Jim Crow South aimed to stop all efforts by any means necessary. Thus, a new fight began for civil rights and freedom, in which education was at

the core (Anderson, 1988; Ntiri, 2014). Voter disenfranchisement was one of the ways that dominant group members sought to continue to oppress Black people and has continued to suppress civic engagement practices of Black people. However, as education continued to be the tool for freedom, education for adults became a tool used in the fight for the civil right to vote (Kates, 2006; Rachal, 2000). At the center of the struggle for voters' rights were Black women who organized and educated the Black community on their civic rights to have a say in how the United States operates (Ntiri, 2014; Rosser-Mims, 2018). This same use of adult education to foster voter literacy and combat voter disenfranchisement was spearheaded once again by Black women during the November 2020 and January 2021 elections. The following reflections will focus on the role of Black women as social justice adult educators as part of the search for Black freedom in the South.

### THE POWER OF THE BLACK WOMAN'S VOICE AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**B**efore the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately seven million tourists visited the Greater Charleston, South Carolina area every year (Palkowski, 2018). Inevitably, they must travel on the Septima Poinsette Clark Parkway on their sojourns to the Slave Market, the South Carolina Aquarium, or the new International African American Museum. However, very few people know the history of this Black woman educator and civil rights activist who created citizenship pathways through literacy education. Prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, many African Americans who could not read were denied the right to vote. To qualify to vote, they were subjected to poll taxes and literacy tests. Septima Poinsette Clark and Ella Baker's advocacy surrounding voter education helped to prepare millions of African Americans to exercise their right to vote. By designing an adult education program grounded in critical literacy and arming teachers to implement a grassroots reading program (Sea Island Citizenship Schools), they brought about significant social change.

Collectively, Clark and Baker's efforts led to voters' rights empowerment and greater community and civil rights engagement. Findings indicate that the model for literacy education utilized by Clark and Baker helped mobilize African American voters. By creating a curriculum that reflected adult learners' needs and backgrounds, this critical literacy model addressed pressing social issues in an environment where students and teachers learned from each other and helped change their communities. Black women such as Septima Poinsette Clark and Ella Baker played a crucial role in advocating for voting rights as a pathway for full citizenship during the civil rights movement. Their leadership models offer insight into today's social justice movements (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Taylor, 2014).

January 20, 2021 will forever be a hallmark in the history of Black women because it marked the inauguration of the first woman Vice President of the United States Kamala D. Harris. She was a Howard University graduate, one of the premier Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). She was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, the oldest Black Greek sorority in the country, known for its commitment to service to all humanity. Her hard-won election represents the fruits of Septima Poinsette Clark and Ella Baker's activism and their insistence on using the vote to affect social change. At a time, decades removed, the people's voice

prevailed and moved Vice President Harris to the second in command in the most powerful nation in the world.

Still, the quest for Black freedom in the South, particularly for Black women, is an ongoing challenge. With the frequent occurrences of social unrest that range from the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others, citizens understand that they must use their voice and their vote to effect change (Taylor, 2016). Ella Baker notes, "Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a White woman's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens" (Mueller, 2004). This means adult education focused on critical literacy and utilizing the vote is important now more than ever. Clark and Baker represent a lineage of Black women who are tirelessly devoted to the liberation of Black people. That liberation must come through education and participatory democracy. In the words of Ella Baker, "...we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes" (Mueller, 2004). Like them, we use our voice to effect change in our communities and in our world.

Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, another pioneer in African American women's history, noted that "... 'tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice" (Cooper, 1988). Similarly, Vice President Harris is already letting her voice be heard, proclaiming that "What I want young women and girls to know is: You are powerful and your voice matters." (Harris, 2019). May the refrains of these powerful women frame the voices that demand social justice and Black Freedom in the New South.

### GEORGIA BLUE, BLACKWOMXNHOOD, AND FREEDOM

**B**lack political leaders have continued to play a significant role in educating the Black community on government structure and politics for many years. In the case of the state of Georgia, a Black woman by the name of Stacy Abrams has dedicated the past decade to developing the political change she wanted to see for her state and nation. By working diligently to build a political infrastructure in the state of Georgia through her organization, New Georgia Project and the Voting Rights Organization, she was able to shift the ways politicians view Black and non-White votes. Other organizations and other political leaders, such as Deborah Scott of Georgia Stand Up, played a role in the 15-year-old shift of the state as well.

The focus of Stacy Abrams's voting rights organization is to address voter suppression. Suppression that the Black community has endured for many years. Abrams believes political change comes from protest and participation (Abrams, 2021). Her focus on empowering and educating the community alongside grass-root workers resulted in the political switch in the state of Georgia from a Red state (majority Republican votes) to Blue (majority Democratic votes). The quest for freedom for Black womxn is ongoing. Through political education, Black women in Georgia were able to bring about a political shift that symbolizes hope and change. The importance of the history made in the November 2020 election is the fruits of Black women's labor. It was historic in its seeing the first Black and South Asian woman elected to Vice President and the first Black Senator and first Jewish Senator elected in the conservative southern state of Georgia.

The Black womxn experience needs to be recognized in the midst of political gains made across

the nation and, more specifically, Georgia. We refer to this experience as the "Black womxn experience" to include binary and non-binary Black womxn. Recognizing the Black womxn experience allows us to understand further the difficulties Black womxn face in a society that was not built with Black womxn in mind. Black womxn face intersectional experiences of being Black and womxn that comes with double the oppression due to two identity factors that place them farther away from the dominant White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) and male norm. For many years Black womxn have had to silence one part of their identity to empower the other. Some womxn's identities are even further multilayered by their immigration status, sexuality, class, gender identity, and other identical factors. The lack of recognition toward Black womxn experiences ignores an entire population of womxn. Black womxn are seldomly the center of a movement. Yet, Black womxn are present on the frontline of each movement. Bernice King, the daughter of the late Martin Luther King Jr., recently reminded us in a tweet this past MLK day, "As you honor my father today, please honor my mother, as well. She was the architect of the King Legacy and founder of The King Center (King, 2021).

We are reminded of this through Stacy Abrams and other Black womxn's roles in the 2020 elections. The mainstream media did not highlight her position until the people used the power of social media to ensure her name was not erased from history. Social media continues to celebrate Black womxn in an effort to ensure history that is being made today makes it into the history books of tomorrow. Black womxn must not be erased or forgotten in the retelling of history. Stacy Abrams used her voice to educate and empower a community and changed our nation's entire trajectory. She educated and advocated to achieve social justice within the community she serves, and through that change, the nation was able to reap the benefit. The importance of educating to achieve social change is something Black womxn have continued to push as they continue to strive for social justice.

## SANKOFA, SALVATION, AND THE SOUTH

**T**he Southern states in the U.S. have a terrible reputation for racism, white supremacy, and devastation for Black folx in this country. Growing up as a Black girl in the South, it is not uncommon to encounter hurt, pain, anger, or confusion resulting from racism. Some of your family may have experienced discrimination so much that they have become numb to it. They may have stopped wondering why specific opportunities seemed to be absent from their lives, why their many years of working for so and so never paid off. The constant over-disciplining they received in school may have been forgotten after growing up and having to pull over for driving while Black, being watched or followed in certain stores, or not being welcomed in communities reserved only for certain people. As a child, it is hard to fathom that the color of one's skin can alter one's lived experience substantially because that seems so farfetched, ridiculous even. Yet, being Black in the United States can come with some or all of these things that scar but can also come with so much more.

Through education, we can find our way to freedom. Through the embodiment of Sankofa, we find our salvation. Sankofa is a West African symbol representing the idea of looking back to the past to move forward (Talpade & Talpade, 2014). The term Sankofa is often used to communicate the message to *go back and fetch* [emphasis added] or can be described as a call to explore your

history or roots (Temple, 2010). While looking back, there are sad and devastating things that can be seen, and there are also beautiful positive things that can be used to remind us of who we are, where we come from, and what we are capable of. As we go back and fetch our ancestors' lessons, we see Black women who have paved the way for freedom for Black people. Septima, Ella, Stacy, Kamala. Black women who were able to achieve what was once believed unattainable and foster momentous historical happenings. It started with our people's education from our people -voter literacy, citizenship schools, grassroots organizing against voter disenfranchisement. These Black women used education as tools for freedom that benefited individuals and made huge strides that are valuable for the collective. We must remember and address these acts of adult education as social justice. We remember, we learn from them, and we use these lessons to help generations to come. But yes, we also recognize that our country's region that fostered so much pain, hate, and dehumanization was also the site for education for social change and liberation spearheaded by Black women. May we never forget these Black women and the future Black womxn that use their generational and ancestral power toward freedom in the South and this country.

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