



**OUR YOUNG, BLACK ACTIVISM
ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF BROWN V BOARD**
Dr. Jasmine L. Harris

In the winter of 1969, during the frigid spring semester at the University of Minnesota, a coalition of Black students staged a sit-in protest at Morrill Hall, occupying the office of the bursar and records for almost twenty-four hours.

Led by Afro-American Action Committee (AAAC) President Rosemary Freeman, a sophomore, and one of only eighty-seven Black students on a campus of 40,000, the organization had communicated their grievances and demands for institutional changes several times previously.

Freeman was originally from Browning, Mississippi, an all-Black community created by a group of ex-slaves shortly after the Civil War. She first came to activism as a high school student working to register Black voters in the south under Martin Luther King Jr. She'd been previously jailed for her participation in voter registration and was therefore no stranger to contentious political situations.

The assassinations of Dr. King and then Robert Kennedy in 1968 intensified the AAAC's desire to call the university to action. Among other things, they wanted the institution to foster diversity on campus via scholarships for local Black high school students and the creation of an African American Studies department.

University of Minnesota President Malcolm Moos, previously radio silent in response to the committee's outreach, negotiated a common ground to end the protest by the deadline. And thanks to the action of the AAAC, an African American Studies department was created and the university opened its doors more readily to local Black talent.

In February 2019, the University's Department of African American and African Studies celebrated the fiftieth reunion of the protest with teach-ins at the student union, the first time for a public reckoning of the events of 1969.

Rosemary Freeman, along with John Wright, Horace Huntley, and Warren Tucker Jr., are rarely known. As the AAAC president and, as she tells it, the one who leveled the playing field between herself and President Moos by greeting him in his own office chair during negotiations, Freeman's involvement is often glossed over in the scant number of available retellings.

When I started my doctoral work in the sociology department at the University of Minnesota almost exactly forty years after the Morrill Hall Takeover (as it has come to be known), I'd never heard the story, nor did I understand the legacy of Freeman's leadership.

Which stories get told impact who is able to feel empowered by them. The erasure of Black women's stories weakens our understanding and connection to the legacy of Black women's accomplishments and dims the possibility of our collective strength.

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Fifteen years before the Morrill Hall Takeover, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), working with Black families around the country, brought local lawsuits against counties across the South after being blocked from enrolling their children, mostly Black girls, into segregated white schools, culminating in the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized educational desegregation. The stories of coordinated legal action are rarely heard, silencing the voices of all those other families who sacrificed themselves for the integration fight but whose names are absent from historical narratives on the issue.

Brown v. Board of Education has been watered down to focus on one little girl, Linda Brown, wiping away what was actually a long-term, strategic plan between the NAACP, more than a dozen families, and the students themselves. This organized erasure of complex political protests organized in Black communities maintains perceptions of our ineptness in political organizing.

It is not a coincidence that girls and women (often mothers and teachers) led the fight for school desegregation. Black girls learn early in life that they will be expected to be poised and strong-willed in the face of danger and degradation. The girls on the front lines of desegregation were physically and psychologically attacked, ignored, or otherwise pushed to their limits at school. In response, their voices were their weapons. They utilized silence when deliberately provoked and spoke up in classes where teachers ignored their signals to participate voluntarily. They endured, sure, but they also made waves.

So much of the work of political organizing and protest has been concentrated among Black girls, in schools. But to highlight our skills of organization and execution of activism is to magnify our strengths, so the strategy and forethought of Black activism must be repackaged as insignificant or nonexistent. I didn't know my own connections to the desegregation movement until recently, which is perhaps to say I didn't know my strength.

Three years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, The Little Rock Nine, nine Black students—six girls and three boys—enrolled at the all-white Little Rock Central High School just a few blocks from where my mother lived with her family in Arkansas. Just a toddler at the time, my mother and her siblings were often under the care of fifteen-year-old, Carlotta (Walls) LaNier, the youngest of the Little Rock Nine attempting to integrate the local high school and the first Black woman to graduate from Little Rock Central High School.

Carlotta was my family's regular babysitter; she was also on the front lines of American desegregation. She, along with her eight classmates, withstood the racial slurs and threats of physical violence in the name of education. She also paid a heavy price. After her graduation, the Walls family was forced to relocate to Colorado to find work and avoid the backlash caused by Carlotta's participation in the equal education fight. Ms. LaNier was a woman I'd never heard directly linked to my family until recently, when I made the decision to uncover her story as a part of ours.

History, as a discipline and a social construct, does not view women, especially Black women, as historical actors. Despite our accomplishments, what we do is not often chronicled as "real" history.

This is as true at Vassar as at any other HWSCU. In 1969 and again in 1990, Black students protested on campus and occupied buildings to demand fair treatment and increased support structures for Black students. In 1969, thirty-four Black women undergrads took over the main building in the early morning hours, a result of detailed tactical planning, which allowed them to take over the switchboard with relative ease. They remained for three days until then President Alan Simpson responded to their demands.

In February 1990, a group of Black students again staged a sit-in at the main building, this time to protest the hiring of Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a white Republican sociologist infamous for his racist theories about the status of Black communities—as a distinguished lecturer at the college. Moynihan quit his post as a result of the protests.

On college campuses, Black students are challenging their “othered” status in ways I never thought possible.

Recollection of the events is captured in the Vassar Encyclopedia, but you won't hear discussions of their organization on campus or about the improvements made as a result of their efforts. There aren't photos capturing their occupation of Main Hall hung alongside those pictures of almost two hundred years of white students that serve as a visual history of the place. There are no anniversary celebrations or well-kept archives of what these students were fighting against or what they achieved. Their stories are functionally lost from the general history of the college.

Black students continue standing on the front lines of protests against police brutality and racism on college campuses across the country. They are being jailed, threatened, and vilified but also ignored in favor of the mainstream appeal of white student activists when the topic is appropriately “non-racial.” On college campuses, Black students are challenging their “othered” status in ways I never thought possible.

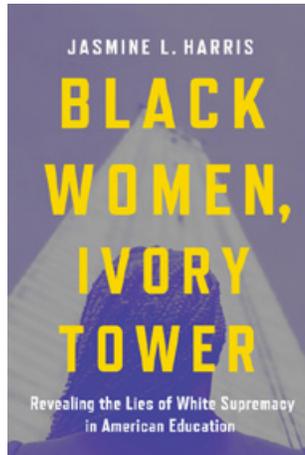
Conservatives often perpetuate the false narrative that colleges are places where hyper-liberal professors hijack students’ minds with impractical, politically correct ideals. In reality, my students, mostly Black women, come to me not initially looking to protest. They want to belong, to be the proverbial Vassar girls their white counterparts are offered the chance to become. And they are frustrated that the promises of higher education don’t seem to apply to them.

We are not so different, my students and me. Protest is a last resort, a desperate act from groups of people without access to conventional support, but also with limited information about the activism of their forbearers. These Black women want an education free from all the trappings of white supremacy that limit their potential.

I didn’t protest when I probably should’ve. I didn’t recognize my connections to Black women activists and disruptors of the past, but they were there to be heard. And so, I try to pass down these stories **as bits of wisdom from the ancestors that I wish I’d had.** 📖



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