Letting Their Voices be Heard:

Black Female Activism in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s -1960s



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GKMV04001

Name: Anne Dingemans

Student number: 3693864

Advisor: Dr. Laura Visser-Maessen

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Introduction

"Even in pre-civil war days, black [sic] women stood in the vanguard for equal rights; [sic] for freedom from slavery, for recognition of women as citizens and co-partners with men in all of life's endeavors.... However, because of the nature of American history, and particularly because of the institutions of slavery and segregation, the names and lives of black women leaders are all but unknown in American society-black as well as white."[1]

From the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, African American women have played a pivotal role in fighting for racial justice. However, when one learns about the history of the Civil Rights Movement and the activists involved, one would get the impression that there were only a few women involved such as, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Daisy Bates and Ella Baker.[2] Most civil rights leaders in history books are black men, like Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, while women also provided leadership. Women's roles as grassroots organizers were decisive in mobilizing and transforming the Civil Rights Movement. According to Deborah Atwater, "African American women have played significant roles in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality. They have organized and led struggles for suffrage, for anti-lynching laws, for full employment, and against Jim Crow laws."[3] But, although their actions were vital for the Civil Rights Movement, their contributions are largely neglected in the history books. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to show that the perception that men alone were leading and participating in the Civil Rights Movement does not do justice to the story of the civil rights struggle.

The role of black female activists cannot be examined in its entirety, and therefore the focus of this thesis is restricted to the legacies of Ella Baker (1903-1986), Rosa Parks (1913-2005), and Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977). Each represented or symbolized one of the most visible means in which African-American women supported the Movement. Ella Baker was known for her antipathy to hierarchy and therefore she was a promotor of "participatory democracy." This idea encouraged the development and mobilization of community leaders to broaden the base for decision-making.[4] Rosa Parks, also known as "the mother of the Civil

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[1] Quote by American poet and writer Margaret Walker (in Sterling 1979, xvi)
[2] Laverne Gyant, "Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement" in *Journal of lac Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5, S*pecial Issue: The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (May, 1996) 630.
[3] Deborah Atwater, "The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement" in *Journal of lac Studies*, Vol. 26.5, Special Issue: *The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (May, 1996) 539.
[4] Carol Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 52.

Rights Movement," helped spark the Civil Rights Movement in 1955 when she refused to leave her seat for a white male passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. Parks became an enduring symbol of racial justice and human rights. Although, much of the memorialization reduced her historical contribution to a single act on a bus, she challenged racial inequality in her own community and in the North.[5] Like Baker, she was a community leader who encouraged young activists to form their own Movement.

And finally, Fannie Lou Hamer, born in a Mississippi sharecropper family, was known for her role as a cultural carrier.[6] She brought people together into a community to empower them and to encourage them to participate in the electoral process. She became a national voice who assumed major responsibility for the creation a safe environment for the African American people.

Each of these three women activists have demonstrated their strong and persistent commitment to promote civil rights and equal opportunities for themselves, their families, and their race during the 1950s and 1960s. However, in the historical accounts dating from that time period, these and other female activists received little recognition. This led to a renewed academic discussion on the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, and its representation of male civil rights leaders compared to female civil rights leaders, among revisionist historians.

Academic Debate

The master narrative represents the Civil Rights Movement as a struggle to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans through political and legislative means, centered around a charismatic male leader. The narrative describes it as a protest movement led by charismatic male leaders, who aimed at political and legislative achievements during the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s.[7] This perception that men alone were leading and participating in the Civil Rights Movement is a product of top-down historiography, in which contributions from the "top" are studied. Since women have never been allowed to be on "top," their contributions are excluded. Also, the master narrative has

[5] Renee C. Romano (ed.), and Leigh Raiford (ed.), *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, Paperback 2006) xii.
[6] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Women as Cultural Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 203.
[7] Charles Payne, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View From the Trenches," 14. <http://www.achievementseminars.com/seminar_series_2006_2007/readings/Payne%20debating-1.pdf> 14-07-2015.

taught people that social movements were often organized by men since most accounts from the 1950s and 1960s focus on male leaders and the organizations they led.[8]

In recent years, the one-sided perspective of the master narrative has encouraged an academic debate among revisionist historians like John Dittmer Charles Payne, Steven F. Lawson and Adam Fairclough. Their aim is to broaden people's view of the Civil Rights Movement since they regard the master narrative as "a naive, top-down, normative perspective on movement history."[9] It simplifies and mischaracterizes key aspects of the Civil Rights movement. Fairclough investigates in his article "State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement" how periods that once seemed sharply defined, change overtime. Classic interpretations use the popular "Montgomery to Memphis" time-frame and consider the assassination of King, in 1968 as the end of the Movement. It is tempting to turn to the conventional turning points of the civil rights struggle, such as the Brown v. Board of Education, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the student sit-ins, but these events do not represent the complete story of the Movement.[10] Fairclough shows that it is important to pay attention to the historical context because the civil rights struggle consisted of different phases.[11] He also warns that much civil rights historiography examined either white or black actions. The tendency to segregate history by race presents a distorted image since the Civil Rights Movement involved a dialectic between whites and blacks.[12] Studying the dialectic will give a completely different of the Civil Rights Movement than the master narrative, Fairclough argues.

Besides studying both white and black actions, Lawson emphasizes to not only focus on national leaders, but also on the grassroots leaders. He emphasizes in his article "Freedom Then, Freedom Now" to move beyond the classical notion of a protest orchestrated by national leaders in order to achieve national civil rights legislation.[13] He states that the grassroots efforts of the "invisible activists" should become the focal point of future research. Many researchers have begun pursuing a more interactive model of research that will examine the relations between the sexes and the races, and between local and national political

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[8] Vicki L. Crawford, "Beyond the Human Self: Grassroots Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement" in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 13.
[9] Jennifer Frost, "Using "Master Narratives" to Teach History: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement" 437,438.
[10] Adam Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 24, No.3 (December, 1990) 388.
[11] Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," 390.
[12] Ibidem, 393.
[13] Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review*, Vol.96, No.2 (Apr., 1991) 457.

struggles.[14] This expansion of research implies that the relationship between male- and female activists, national- and local activists, and the relationship between predecessors and contemporaries is important to study to understand the complete syntheses of in the Civil Rights Movement will be examined thoroughly.

Another important aspect of the debate is to understand the reasons behind the invisibility of African American women in the Civil Rights Movement. "Scholars have begun to clarify the way gender is "played out" in movements and alternatively shaped by them."[15] Yvette Marie Alex-Assensoh argues in *Black and Multiracial Politics in America* (2000) that African American women received little recognition due to the fact that African American women remained "marginal and peripheral to the political and social order."[16] Black women were confronted by both a gender and a race problem in American society. Therefore, as Belinda Robnett noted in *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1999), the experiences of African-American women organizers have been underemphasized in favor of higher-profile African-American men, like King, or in favor of white women. The primary avenue of leadership open to black women was "grassroots leadership" that served as a critical bridge between the formal organization and the potential constituents.[17]

Charles Payne presents another argument on why black female activists were not on the forefront of the struggle. He noted that "women created the movement, made people feel a part of it, and did the everyday work upon which most things depended, while men made the public announcements, and negotiated with management."[18] Women performed more psychological, cultural or social roles, like mobilizing existing social networks around the organizing goals, mediating conflicts, coordinating activity, and conveying information.[19] Although his study on movement participation of women in the Mississippi Delta demonstrated an over participation of black women in the organization, they all performed the

[14] Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 457.
[15] Jenny Irons, "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement" in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 12. 6, Special Issue: Gender and Social Movements, Part 1 (December, 1998) 693.
[16]Yvette Marie Alex-Assensoh and Lawrence J. Hanks, *Black and Multiracial Politics in America* (New York University Press, 2000) 377.
[17] Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1999) 191.
[18] Charles Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 8.
[19] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized," 8.

social, cultural and psychological roles behind the scenes of the organization.[20] There they created an atmosphere that sustained good relations and solidarity among co-workers. Moreover, Donna Langston argues that "women's involvement in cultural programs and education has been pivotal" because "their programs fostered the formation of class and race identity and raised consciousness."[21]

Finally, all the different views that revisionists have presented on the master narrative in the last couple of years, have eroded as a new paradigm called "The Long Movement". Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang present four interrelated conceptualizations that challenge the previous interpretations of black freedom movements, namely "locality"; the modern Civil Rights Movement was a series of local struggles rather than a national social movement, "reperiodization"; the modern Civil Rights Movement transcends the historical period 1955-1975, "continuity"; the Civil Rights and Black Power movements are not distinct social movements, but rather a single continuous struggle for black freedom, and "the South was not distinct from the North"; the differences between southern de jure and northern de facto racial oppression were exaggerated, and racism is nationwide four propositions."[22] While a few of the individual proposals may be accurate, Keita Cha-Jua and Lang argue that collectively they misinterpret the modern Black Liberation Movement. For example, they fear that the tendency of some revisionist toward expanding periodization, erases conceptual differences, and eliminates regional distinctions.[23] A totalizing perspective on the Black Liberation Movement reduces the African American experience and makes it ahistorical.[24] Fairclough also warned that broad definitions, such as "black freedom struggle seeking a broad range of goals," turn history in a homogenized mush, without sharp breaks and transformations."[25] So in explaining the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, the historical context is vital.

Also, Cha-Jua and Lang argue that erasing the differences between North and South, disfigures the past, and disservices activists who clearly did recognize those differences.[26]

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[20] Ibidem, 1.
[21] Donna Langston, "The Women of Highlander," in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 145, 146.
[22] Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, and Clarence Lang, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," in *The Journal of African American History,* Vol.92., No.2 (Spring, 2007) 265.
[23] Cha Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 265.
[24] Ibidem, 284.
[25] Adam Fairclough, "State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 24, No.3 (December, 1990) 388.
[26]Cha Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 283.

However, revisionists Charles Payne and Jeanne Theoharis argue that the North South distinction should be erased"[27]So, this essay by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Long shows how the theoretical propositions and historical interpretations that revisionist historians present can differ at many levels. This notion will be taken into account in the first chapter which discusses criticisms on the 1954/5-65 framework and the goals of the Civil Rights Movement

Thesis Question and Sub Questions

In the academic debate all revisionist historians agree that the male centered master narrative distorts the story of the Civil Rights Movement. However, there is still something missing in the discussion. A few scholars, like Charles Payne, and Donna Langston, have mainly focused on the fact that female activists were vital for social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of the Movement, and not for the political and legislative goals. However, the master narrative only focuses on the political and legislative purposes, and neglects the other factors. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to show that the social, psychological, and cultural purposes that women fulfilled were particularly essential for the political, and legislative goals emphasized by the master narrative. Therefore, the following thesis question will be examined, *In which ways was the activism of Ella Baker (1903-1986), Rosa Parks (1913-2005) and Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977) representative of the avenues available for black female activism in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s -1960s and how does this alter the 'master narrative' of the Civil Rights Movement?*

This question can be answered by investigating the three sub-questions. The main question of the first chapter will focus on how the Civil Rights Movement is represented by its master narrative, and what role gender plays in the creation of the master narrative? Before taking into account all the criticisms that revisionist historians have on the master narrative, it is crucial to take a closer look at how history books, the media, and popular culture represent the Civil Rights Movement. What events and names are considered most important, and how is the Civil Rights Movement remembered in the collective memory of the American people? To analyze this, examples of memorials, films, and other forms of cultural expression will be researched.

Chapter two focuses on the questions, "How was female political activism perceived within the Civil Rights Movement and within the American society in general?", "To what

[27] Ibidem, 281.

extent were women able to play active roles in the Movement, and what factors might explain why women were less incorporated in the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement?" In order to answer these questions, the avenues available for female participation in the Civil Rights Movement will be described. Factors like gender, sexism, and class play an important role in this chapter. The first section analyzes how both black and white women, and female political activism were perceived within the Civil Rights Movement and within the American society in general? To what extent were women able or allowed to be politically active? What were their possibilities within the Movement, and for whom were these accessible? Finally, the role of the media will be examined. To what extent did the media pay attention to female activists?

Chapter three contains three case studies of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks. The purpose of the case-studies in is to determine how essential female civil rights activism was for the success of the Civil Rights Movement. In this chapter, Belinda Robnett's social movement theory will be taken into account. Each woman represents a particular leadership role. Then, the conclusion shall demonstrate how their leadership roles influenced the memory of the Civil Rights Movement. How representative were Baker's, Hamer's, and Parks' leadership roles for female participation in general? And, have their contributions altered the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement?

Methodology

The aim of this historical research is to focus on how the Civil Rights Movement is memorized and how the contributions of Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer shed another light on the master narrative. Baker, Parks, and Hamer are only a few of the thousands of African American women who have seized every opportunity to achieve success within the Civil Rights Movement. Baker declared that, "the movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women, since it came out of church.... The number of women who carried the movement was much larger than that of men."[28] Thus, that women were able to exercise some influence is certain.

But, why is the analysis on the vital role of female participation centered around Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks? To explain this, one needs to know what types of female leadership they represent. Belinda Robnett's framework on the variation in leadership

[28] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 630.

among large organizations and grassroots movement work, distinguishes the following leadership roles: professional, indigenous, community, and mainstream leaders. Robnett introduces layers of leadership that include formal and bridge leadership. This is allows people to compare women's roles across organizational lines. Robnett's socio-historical approach of black women's leadership shows that women were the bridge between local civil rights struggles and national protest organizations.[29] The term "socio-historical" was originally defined by novelist Alice Walker. A socio-historical analysis reflects "a consciousness that incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political considerations."[30] According to Robnett, "a substantial proportion of the processes of recruitment, mobilization and sustenance"[31]of the Civil Rights Movement was performed by African-American women. As "bridge leaders," a term Robnett coined, women sewed in an important intermediate capacity; they were the vital link between nationally recognized male leaders and the masses of people, especially at the local level. Women were able to "bridge, extend, amplify and transform" the Movement's message, and this was critical to the movement's success.[32]

Thus, what type of leadership roles do Baker, Parks, and Hamer represent, and why were they chosen for this thesis' analysis? Ella Baker was a civil rights organizer, a strategist and a strong promoter of grassroots organizing and radical democracy. According to Robnett's leadership framework, Baker was a professional bridge leader.[33] She worked alongside and influenced the actions of several prominent civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr., and organizations like The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She provided SCLC's organizational foundation besides being involved in several women's organizations, and she was mostly committed to economic justice for all people. She once said, "People cannot be free until there is enough work in this land to give everybody a job."[34] Baker's vision on leadership is that, "strong people don't need strong leaders."[35] She believed in empowering people through their direct participation in social change. Her group-centered

[29] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?,* 21.
[30] Ibidem, 6.
[31] Ibidem, 19.
[32] Ibidem, 190.
[33] Ibidem, 97.
[34] Davis W. Houck, and David E. Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965, Volume 1* (Baylor University Press, 2006) 687.
[35] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy," 51.

leadership philosophy turned out to be a success since she found a receptive audience and therefore her contributions as a female civil rights activist will be examined in this thesis

Rosa Parks' leadership role is similar to Baker's, however Parks can be best described as a community bridge leader. Through grassroots organizing and community empowerment, she wanted to connect the black poor in Montgomery with the working class in the North. Parks was the first African American woman to refuse to leave her seat in the white section on a Montgomery bus. Her action sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Over the years, Parks has become a nationally recognized symbol of dignity and strength in her struggle to end entrenched racial segregation.

Finally, Fannie Lou Hamer, has often been described as a charismatic leader, however she never received her place as a primary formal leader within the movement sector, Robnett notes.[36] But, Hamer had the ability to arouse listeners in a way only she could do. "She was a natural and fearless community leader, master orator, and song leader, she used her stories and songs to nurture the air we breathed as fighter."[37] Furthermore, she is known for her tireless efforts to change the conditions of African Americans in Mississippi. Bernice Johnson Reagon considered her much more than "a talker, organizer, and singer; her effort brought results."[38] All three activists represent distinct strategies to fight racial inequality. Together, their leadership roles present a different perspective on the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore these three women are examined in the case-studies.

Besides analyzing the leadership positions of Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer, this historical research also requires an analysis of (popular) cultural expressions, and other public tokens of expression. To determine how the master narrative is represented in popular culture, there needs to be an overview of expressions of popular memory in the Civil Rights Movement, such as street names, buildings, memorials, public holidays, and films. This also includes media expressions in the form of newspapers such as *Time Magazine*, and *The New York Times*, that report on civil rights leaders.

To support the historical analysis on female leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, primary sources such as stories, oral histories, diaries, interviews, narratives, and remembrances about the author's experiences in the Movement will be analyzed. Of particular importance are speeches or other testimonies of the three female civil rights activists, for example Fannie Lou Hamer's Testimony Before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic

[36] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 195.
[37] Reagon, "Women as Culture Carriers," 204.
[38] Ibidem, 203.

National Convention, or Fannie Lou Hamer's speech "Until I Am Free, You Are Not Free Either" given at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in January 1971, and oral history interviews, or excerpts of interviews. These are first-person accounts that give an insight in people's thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, many documentaries on Baker, Hamer, and Parks are available on the Internet that provide an authentic image of their role in the Civil Rights Movement as well. All these primary sources can be found on the website www.crmvet.org.

Another source that gives an exclusive insight in the treatment of women within a civil rights organization, in this case SNCC, is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper. This paper lists numerous situations where female members were placed in positions below their skill level, while less qualified males were placed above them. So, this paper shows how gender relations and sexism influenced women's positions in a civil rights organization.

However, it must be noted that oral history interviews and memories do have its shortcomings since people's recollective powers are limited. Memories fade, and what people felt, thought, or did at the time is filtered through the lens of our current knowledge. Therefore, primary sources will be supported by secondary sources to avoid getting a distorted picture of the past.

Chapter 1

The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory

"We have the record of kings and gentlemen ad nauseam and in stupid detail, but of the common run of human beings…the world has saved all too little of authentic record and tried to forget or ignore even the little saved."[39]

Above observation was written by W. E. B. DuBois in 1951 in which he criticized the fact that many scholars depend primarily on the records of elite individuals and groups to describe an event in the American past. The kind of sources that modern historians use today depend largely on the interests, prejudices, and values of the collectors, archivists, and historians from the past.[40] Since the common people left few traces in historical records, they were largely ignored or forgotten.[41] As Arthur Schlesinger Sr. noted back in 1922, "from reading history textbooks one would think half of our population made only a negligible contribution to history."[42] The kind of sources that modern historians use today depend largely on the interests, prejudices, and values of the collectors, archivists, and historians from the past. Furthermore, where and how historians begin and end their histories is a choice that fundamentally affects how stories in the history books are told.

These factors also influenced how the story of the Civil Rights Movement is remembered in the American public memory. Most history books tend to present the Civil Rights Movement as a struggle largely composed of African American male leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., and the groups that were most committed to marching and other forms of non-violent action.[43] At the expense of this image, the contributions of grassroots organizations, and in particular of (black) women, were largely ignored in the historical debate. In more than thirty years of scholarship since the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, their leadership roles, and experiences have been underexposed or considered of secondary importance to those of men.[44] Fortunately, a change has come about and modern black women activists, the unsung heroes, are finally gaining recognition. In recent years,

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[39] "Introduction," in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, 1951) i.
[40] Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 211.
[41] Billy Gordon Smith, *The "lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Cornell University Press, 1994) xi.
[42] Leonard Dinnerstein and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *American Vistas: 1607-1877* (Oxford University Press, 1979) 64.
[43] Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," 391.
[44] Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class," in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June, 1993) 163.

revisionist historians like Adam Fairclough, Steven Lawson, Belinda Robnett, and Charles Payne have been calling for a reconsideration of the traditional narrative that permeates American popular- and academic culture. They question the image of the Civil Rights Movement that is most commonly represented in the history books, the media, and in popular culture. According to them, the master narrative does not do justice to the complete story of the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, the revisionists have shifted their focus to rewrite the history of the Civil Rights Movement from the bottom up. They re-centered the lesser-known leaders, and the underexposed roles of African American women, and gender into the Civil Rights narratives.[45]

In order to determine why black female activists are less visible in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement compared to male activists, it is necessary to analyze how the Civil Rights Movement is represented in the master narrative, and what role gender plays in the construction of the master narrative. The Movement struggled to demonstrate gender equality in its treatment of female civil rights activists. Gender treatment among blacks is derived from church traditions that considered the male minister as "the leader". Historically, black women have never been allowed to become top decision makers in the male-dominated hierarchy of the Black Baptist church."[46] Furthermore, the "great man" theory of leadership played a central role in social movement scholarship.[47] But, like any master narrative, the civil rights story is heatedly contested as it legitimizes actions, outcomes, and interpretations over others. Therefore, this chapter will end with a discussion among revisionist historians concerning the grand narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

[45] Cha-Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 268.
[46] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women," 170.
[47] Ibidem, 163,164.

1.1. Gender and the Master Narrative

When explaining the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, gender plays a defining role. The tendency to concentrate on charismatic male leaders has not only left its marks in history books, but also in various cultural expressions like films, memorials, and holiday celebrations. Furthermore, even the media and the publication business seem to be infected by the master narrative as the following sections will demonstrate.

1.1.1. "The Master Narrative"

American popular and academic culture has been dominated by a master narrative about the Civil Rights Movement. Before serious scholarship on the modern Civil Rights Movement emerged in the late 1970s, scholars saw the Movement as spontaneous and discontinuous with previous struggles.[48] Scholars who began writing about the movement in the late 1960s emphasized leaders and events of national significance in the master narrative. Either the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, or the individual heroism of Rosa Parks in Montgomery when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in 1955 was considered its starting point.[49] From Montgomery the master narrative continues by highlighting a series of dramatic episodes, such as the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, and the Selma to Montgomery March. Key legislative victories are also an important part of the narrative, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black Americans and the nation as a whole took a crucial step forward by abolishing legal segregation and granting full citizenship rights to African Americans. However, according to the master narrative, the movement fell eventually apart in the mid-1960s. The year 1968 marked the symbolic end of the movement with the assassination of King.[50]

Both the chronology of the master narrative and its moral message are closely tied to the iconic figure of King. It reflects the typical assumptions of what can be called the top-down, normative perspective on movement history, says Charles Payne.[51] This perspective implicates that the successful organizing of the Civil Rights Movement came from the top and moved down through leaders like King. The image of him standing before the Lincoln

[48] Cha-Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 266.
[49] Ibidem, 266.
[50] Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of Civil Rights History" in *The Journal of Southern History* Vol.74., No. 2, (May 2008) 330.
[51] Payne, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement," 14.

Memorial orating about his American Dream is engraved into the American national consciousness and towers over the public memory.[52] It made King the symbol of the civil right struggle and the moral embodiment of the American Dream.

The emphasis on King and other charismatic male leaders can be traced back to pioneering research covering the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. According to Bernice McNair Barnett, former research distinguished three groups of black men namely, the organization heads-positional leaders like King, the Young Turks-shock troops like SNCC member Stokely Carmichael, and the revolutionaries-separatists like members of organizations such as the Black Panther party and Black Muslims.[53] McNair Barnett argues that although the movement scholarship of sociologists has been critical of the "great man" theory of leadership, it still implicitly uses it in its analysis. The crucial roles of black women in the Movement, on the other hand, has been neglected in the majority of existing research on modern social movement theory.[54]

The traditional charismatic perspective of leadership helps explain the neglected focus on black women. According to Aldon Morris, "charisma resides in the Black church and is an integral part of the expectations and experiences of African Americans."[55] In Southern Black and white communities, males were more highly respected as positional leaders and spokespersons. In the Southern social structure of the 1950s, women were expected to be seen, not heard. Also, in Southern Baptist churches a woman's place was "in the pew" and "our of the pulpit."[56] Although they might have done all the work, black women were not recognized as leaders within the black community. According to women- and gender scholars, traditional concepts of leadership and politics made it simply impossible to make women's activism visible.[57] Although women activists, like Ella Baker, developed new concepts of leadership and local initiatives to fight poverty, their commitment was rarely acclaimed by the public. Therefore, they remained unrecognized by historians for a long time.[58]

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[52] Edward P. Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement" in Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford (ed.), *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2006) 140.
[53] Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders," 164, 178.
[54] Ibidem, 164, 165.
[55] Aprele Elliott "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," in *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5, (May, 1996) 594.
[56] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women," 173.
[57] Emilye Crosby, *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (University of Georgia Press, 2011) 55.
[58] Patrick B. Miller and Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited: Critical Perspectives on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2001) 87.

Thus, gender plays an important role in the construction of the master narrative. Role valuation and recognition was strongly gender linked within the black and white community. In all probability, that is also the reason why most social movement theory research has been focusing on male figures, and why rhetorical scholars refer mostly to the body of male rhetoric in their work. But how has this development of the male-focused master narrative influenced the memory of the Civil Rights Movements in the American popular memory. How can this be observed in popular expressions?

1.1.2 The Master Narrative, Gender, and Popular Memory

In the past thirty years, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s has assumed a central place in American historical and popular memory. "Memorial landscapes and spaces play a crucial role in shaping how the public values, identifies with and debates the past."[59] Memories of the movement return in various forms such as, memorials, name signs on streets, advertisements, art exhibits and national celebrations. Events of the movements are dramatized in films like *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), Spike Lee's documentary *Four Little Girls* (1998), *Hairspray* (1988, 2007 remake), and recently in the Best Motion Picture of the Year nominated film *Selma* (2014).[60] Each of these expressions of (popular) memory is engaged in memorializing the Movement in divergent, at times contradicting, ways. How are civil rights figures and events portrayed in the arena of popular culture, and what signs of the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement can be observed in these various expressions?

Commemorative street naming is a well-known vehicle for bringing the past into the present. Streets named after civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. are common features in cities across the United States. They serve as public symbols representing "significant variations in the American social landscape", revealing "the character of both the figure commemorated and the community that has honored him."[61] Michael Schudson says that, "If culture is to influence a person, it must reach the person."[62] Therefore, street naming is a powerful form of commemoration since it is able to make the past accessible to a wide range

[59] Derek H Alderman, "Street names and the scaling of memory: the politics of commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr within the African American community" in *Area* (2003) Vol.35, No.2, 2003, 163.
[60] Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, xii.
[61] R. W. Stump, "Toponymic Commemoration of National Figures: The Cases of Kennedy and King," *Names* 36(3/4), 1988, 215.
[62] Michael Schudson, (1989) "The present in the past versus the past in the present," in *Communication*, 11, 1989, 160.

of social groups. What is striking is that King's name is most frequently attached to streets. By 1996, 483 streets were named after him and the current number of streets is probable much higher.[63] Professor Derek Alderman's research showed in 2013 that more than 900 streets are named after King. These streets are in forty states, and most are densely clustered in the southeastern United States. "That shouldn't be surprising; the Southeast was the major location for the civil rights battle," Alderman said.[64] In 1968, Chicago became the first city in the country to name a street after King called Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. It features a Tribute to the Great Northern Migration and a Victory Monument for the Eighth Regiment.[65]

Besides streets, federal and state holidays are established in King's honor which has made him an official icon of the Civil Rights Movement and black heritage in general. How to commemorate King did cause some competing interpretations. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) wanted to honor their leader through increased social activism and protest, while his wife Correta Scott King, focused more on establishing the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia.[66] So, the commemoration of King can be seen as a forum for African Americans to present their interpretations of how his legacy should be remembered. Foremost, honoring King gave them a sense of racial pride and identity since he served as a role model for the African American community.

Malcolm X's birthday is also commemorated in cities around the world on Malcolm X Day. The city of Berkeley, California, has even recognized Malcolm X's birthday as a citywide holiday since 1979.[67] Many cities have renamed streets after Malcolm X, such as Lenox Avenue in Harlem became Malcolm X Boulevard, and the name of Reid Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, was changed to Malcolm X Boulevard in 1985.[68] Besides streets, dozens of schools have been named after Malcolm X. And on January 20, 1999, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp commemorating Malcolm. Malcolm X's daughter Attallah Shabazz wrote in the foreword of Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcolm X that the stamp also served "as a reminder of the stock from which we were born and confirms

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[63] Alderman, "Street names and the scaling of memory," 163.
[64] "UT Professor Studies How Streets Are Named for Martin Luther King Jr." (January 18, 2013) <http://tntoday.utk.edu/2013/01/18/ut-professor-studies-streets-named-martin-luther-king-jr/> 31-07-2015.
[65]"List of streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_streets_named_after_Martin_Luther_King,_Jr.> 20-07-2015.
[66] Alderman, "Street names and the scaling of memory," 167.
[67]Walker Thaai, "Berkeley Honors Controversial Civil Rights Figure," in *San Jose Mercury News*, May 20, 2005.
[68] Russell J. Rickford, *Betty Shabazz: A Remarkable Story of Survival and Faith Before and After Malcolm X* (Naperville, III.: Sourcebooks, 2003) 419.

significantly that how one lives his or her life today stands as a testament to one's forever."[69] The stamp indicated that Malcolm X was, like King, also being taken into the master narrative.

Memorials and buildings- ranging from simple historic markers to multi-million dollar museums- tend to affirm the master narrative or the traditional ways of American public history as well.[70] The earliest civil rights memorials celebrated great leaders, always elite men and usually King, and overshadowed the contributions of women and workers. The consequence is that the American people have inherited a composite portrait civil rights leadership with a male face.[71] For example, on the King Holiday the media revisits his "I Have a Dream" speech and the pervasive image of King addressing the March on Washington. This moment in public history has been cemented in America's memory. Furthermore, his speech is literally frozen into the stone of one of his memorial in front of the Selma, Alabama, church.[72]King represented the Civil Rights Movement in the minds of untold numbers of Americans.

During the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, influential magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* considered King as the captivating new voice of patient resistance and promise. In February 1957, *Time* place him on the cover for the first time, and in the aftermath of the Birmingham struggle he was crowned "Man of the Year."[73] Furthermore, the mass-market magazines tended to juxtapose the "good" King against civil rights activists whom the national media considered distasteful, like the rhetorically militant activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[74] In comparison to King, they were presented as the bad examples of the civil rights struggle. This was also the case with Malcom X. In 1964, *Newsweek* called King a moderate whose followers believed in a middle way while Malcolm was a man with a menacing word for every occasion. When he got murdered, *Time* discharged him as "a former pimp, cocaine addict, and thief."[75] So, while Malcolm X and King were both respected and established leaders in the African American community, King will always be remembered as the icon of the Civil Rights Movement who represented the American Dream, while Malcolm will be remembered as the outsider or King's radical

[69] Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., paperback, 1987) x, xi.
[70] Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2008) 48.
[71] Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 255.
[72] Ibidem, 142.
[73] Ibidem, 149.
[74] Ibidem, 150.
[75] Ibidem, 150.

twin.[76] The archive of the *New York Times* underlines that the media mostly favored King above the "lesser known" activists. The name "Martin Luther King Jr." appears in 16,267 articles, while the name "Malcolm X" is called in 8,696 articles. Rosa Parks' name appears in 2,003 articles, Ella Baker's in 3,971, and only 188 articles include Fannie Lou Hamer's name.[77] This affirms that the media focused mainly on King.

Constructing the memory of the Civil Rights Movement did not only entail naming streets after slain leaders or designing parks, memorials, and museums. Since the civil rights struggle brought forth many heroes, filmmakers got inspired to bring their stories to the big screen. The subject of the Civil Rights Movement was rarely examined in films. Hollywood has always treaded racial themes carefully. The first feature films to deal with this topic were low-budget independent films that focused more on the sensational aspects of the race struggle in America.[78] The decade of the 1970s saw an explosion of black-themed films that focused occasionally on black empowerment and revolt, but few of them were political. *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), and *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1973), were all based on male protagonists.[79] The first real wave of "civil rights films" that were dedicated to recounting the fight for desegregation emerged in the 1980s. The films actively contributed to shaping people's memory of the 1950s and 1960s.[80] However, most of these films like *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *The Long Walk Home* (1990) dramatized events for national audiences. Contrarily, there were also films made that sought to center the lesser-known stories of the Civil Rights Movement. In *Malcolm X* (1992) Spike Lee provides an authentic portrayal of a leader whose voice was demonized by the mass media since the 1960s. Mario van Peebles film *Panther* (1995) focused on the Black Panthers, and tried to revise the distortions that the mass media provided about the group's historical origins.[81] Representations of outsiders like Malcolm X or the Black Panthers provide new perspectives, but at the same time they are male-centered.

Although, some civil rights films tried to show the other side of the master narrative, women's contributions remain underexplored in fictional representations, especially in the

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[76] Clayborne Carson, "The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X," in *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Jan., 2005) 23.
[77] <http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/> 18-07-2015.
[78]Jason Housley, "Hollywood and The Civil Rights Movement," in *Black Camera*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Spring/Summer, 2004) 7.
[79] Housley, "Hollywood and The Civil Rights Movement," 8.
[80] Delphine Letort, "The Rosa Parks Story: The Making of a Civil Rights Icon," in *Black Camera*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 2012) 31.
[81] Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 154, 155.

1960s.[82] "When individual women are commemorated [in the context of the civil rights struggle], they are usually celebrated for their personal courage rather than for their organizing within broader social networks."[83] This also counts for the biopic *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002). The film stresses the personal rather than the political. It is important that the female protagonist is liked because "white Americans will not like her if she is educated or combative."[84] Furthermore, Rosa Parks's acquaintance with other female civil rights activists like Ella Baker of Septima Clark are left out to weaken her activist commitment. So, *The Rosa Parks Story* ignores Parks's life as an activist, and focuses more on the love relationship between her and Raymond Parks. Septima Clark noticed that the film *From Montgomery to Memphis (1970),* also had not accorded Parks her rightful place. This is the way how mass culture works. It simplifies the past by focusing particularly on the male protagonist in this case. It rather entertains than educates its viewers.[85]

In the recent film Selma (2014) the gender scale is better balanced. Although the film is centered around Martin Luther King, and the Selma to Montgomery marches, director Ava DuVernay also shines a light on the fearless, everyday heroines. DuVernay included Diane Nash, a young strategist who co-founded SNCC, and Annie Lee Cooper, who made national headlines when Sheriff Jim Clark beat her when she protested for the right to vote.[86] And, Coretta Scott King is not just being portrayed as the subservient, decorative wife in the background. Like the other women in the film, she is multi-layered and not afraid to stand up against her husband. So Selma surrounds King with supporters and antagonists, both black and white, both famous and unknown.

According to Delphine Letort, the true story of the Civil Rights Movement has not yet been filmed.[87] They either focus on the well-known leaders, like King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, and James Meredith, or on the students, the Freedom Riders, the participants in Freedom Summer, or members of SNCC, like Robert Moses, Diane Nash, and

[82] Letort, "The Rosa Parks Story," 37.
[83] Owen J. Dwyer, "Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and the Cultural Landscape," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory, Renee C. Romano (ed.) and Leigh Raiford* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006) 11.
[84] Letort, "The Rosa Parks Story,"18.
[85] Ibidem, 39.
[86] Rebecca Theodore-Vachon, "THE WOMEN OF "SELMA": THE UNSUNG HEROINES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT" (January 9, 2015) <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/the-women-of-selma-the-unsung-heroines-of-the-civil-rights-movement> 20-6-2015.
[87] Letort, "The Rosa Parks Story,"45.

James Bevel.[88] No film has successfully shown the story of the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of African American women. Do commercial publishing houses show the same tendency, or do they represent the voice of the female civil rights activist more prominently?

1.1.3 Memoirs and Publication Business

Biography is one of the most popular monographic genres in African American history. It is one of the richest modes of individual and collective expression.[89] Memoirs and autobiographies written by civil rights activists help scholars to understand the character and the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement.[90] A civil rights autobiography follows a specific convention of autobiographical writing that starts with describing the history of the civil rights movement within the family, and during childhood. Then it continues to describe formative experiences of growing up during the years of struggle.[91] Given the prominence of biographies on male black leaders like King, memoirs published by "ordinary" black women active in the movement have received little scholarly attention. Furthermore, they were often excluded in historical works on black leaders.[92] For example, in Clayborne Carson's *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1998), King discusses the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The event propelled him into a position of national recognition as the leader of the "new" movement. Nevertheless, the boycott was initiated by black women like Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, and other educated women of the Women's Political Council.[93] However, King's recollection of the event seems to emphasize that E.D. Nixon, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and himself came with the idea of a bus boycott.[94] After Parks's arrest, E.D. Nixon decided that the best way to mobilize the black community was to enlist the support of a respected black male leader, who for the most part were clergymen.[95] In the end, King was chosen to become president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). According to Clark, Parks gave King the opportunity to practice his nonviolent leadership. "Because by refusing to get up out of that seat was the real fact that he could organize the boycott and work

[88] Bill Morris, "The Civil Rights Movement Finally Gets Its Hollywood Close-Up" (February 13, 2015) <http://www.themillions.com/2015/02/the-civil-rights-movement-finally-gets-its-hollywood-close-up.html> 15-07-2015.
[89] Nasstrom, "Between Memory and History," 329.
[90] Ibidem, 338.
[91] Ibidem, 338.
[92] Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," 391.
[93] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," 168.
[94] Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 51.
[95] Miller, *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited*, 84.

with people all through."[96] Thus while Parks and other women played crucial roles in the success of the boycott, most of the attention was centered on the actions of black male ministers.

The role of female leaders was also disregarded in one of the highest selling African American history titles, *Black Leaders in the Twentieth Century* (1982) by John Hope Franklin and August Meier. It encompasses essays on fifteen nationally known black leaders, but only two women were included, namely Mary McCleod Bethune, and Mabel K. Staupers.[97] This is explainable since, during the 1970s and the 1980s, movement literature focused almost exclusively on the "big men" of the Civil Rights Movement.[98] David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* (1987), and Taylor Branch's trilogy *Parting the Waters* (1998), *Pillar of Fire* (1998), and *At Canaan's Edge* (2007) are centered on the life of King, and are considered the leaders in analyzing his life.[99] However, many more biographies on King's life appeared over the years. The website *The King Center* has a selected bibliography that shows how many books are written by, and about King. More than twenty books, including the autobiography by Carson, have been published on the civil rights leader.[100] Academic scholarship on Black Muslims is dominated by works about Malcolm X. Other "Black Power memoirs" were written by leaders like Stokely Carmicheal, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, and Huey Newton.[101] Furthermore, memoirs and autobiographies on main civil rights organizations like SNCC and CORE were also mostly written by male members. For example, James Forman and Cleveland Seller wrote firsthand accounts about the rise and fall of SNCC.[102] Thus, the male perspective on the civil rights struggle is well represented in civil rights literature.

After the 1990s, scholarly biographies on black women started to blossom. Since then, biographies on lesser-known and well-known black female leaders helped to challenge the myth of male civil rights leadership orthodoxy.[103] The growing tradition of civil rights memoirs by black women includes, among many others, Daisy Bates's *The Long Shadow of*

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[96] Grace Jordan McFadden, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights" in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941*-1965 (Indiana University Press, 1990) 93, 94.
[97] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What is African American History?* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015)
[98] Christopher M. Richardson, Ralph E. Luker, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) 514.
[99] Christopher M. Richardson, Ralph E. Luker, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) 510, 514.
[100] <http://www.thekingcenter.org/books-bibliography> 12-7-2015.
[101] Richardson, *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement*, 513.
[102] Ibidem, 513.
[103] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What is African American History?* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015)

Little Rock (1962), Septima Clark's *Echo in My Soul* (1962), Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), Jo Ann Gibson Robinson's *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (1987), and Melba Pattillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry* (1994). Bates, Clark, and Moody published their accounts shortly after the events they describe, while Robinson, and Beals wrote their stories at least thirty years removed from their participation in the movement.[104] Robinson's memoir begins with a foreword by white historian David Garrow. He admits that he initially had low expectations of her unpublished manuscript. He feared that "Mrs. Robinson's manuscript, like other unpublished autobiographical texts I had been shown in similar circumstances in previous years, might not be a credible candidate for publication."[105] Garrow asked her to explain more her personal motivations for becoming an activist, particularly "at a time and in a place where any manifestations of black dissent often resulted in white retribution, sometimes of a physical sort."[106] Thus, Robinson's memoir might not have been published had she not agreed to Garrow's request for more "personal" revelations.[107]

Although women like Robinson have written their own stories in hopes of recovering their missing presence in history, commercial publishing houses published relatively few of their accounts compared to the distribution of (auto) biographies of male figures. The number of published biographies on King underscores the implication that publishing houses confirm the master narrative. Despite the fact that many women memoirists published their memoirs shortly after the movement, most of them received little scholarly attention and are not as well-known as their male counterparts.[108] Memoirs published by "ordinary" black women active in the movement have, have certainly not been read as histories in their own right. Other than Ella Baker, Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, very few women's stories are recognized in the master narrative of the movement. The focus on the "big men" of the movement, and the top-down approach, has obscured their involvement, and the struggle "on the ground" from which the civil rights movement derived its vitality.[109] The revisionist criticism on the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement is founded on this argument.

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[104] Allison Berg, "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It, Warriors Don't Cry, and From the Mississippi Delta," in *Journal of Women's History,* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 2009) 85.
[105] David J. Garrow, "Foreword," in Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott,* xi
[106] Garrow, "Foreword," xiii.
[107] Berg, "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs," 92.
[108] Ibidem, 85.
[109] Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," 392.

1.2. Criticism of the Master Narrative and Gender

The main criticism of the master narrative by revisionist historians is that it presents a one-sided, top-down perspective of the Civil Rights Movement that does not do justice to the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Adam Fairclough, Steven Lawson, Belinda Robnett, and Charles Payne have challenged the 1950s-1960s timeframe, the goals, and the prevailing patriarchal view on leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Associate Professor and historian Jennifer Frost found that the master narrative largely influenced students' initial understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, since it "most frequently presented the Movement as a short Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."[110] Frost stated that the majority of students, fifty-seven percent, used the typical chronology of the 1950s and 1960s to place the Movement in its time.[111] This number reflects the strong presence of the master narrative that silences and makes invisible the contributions of women. The most significant challenge to this misleading master narrative has come from a multitude of state and local studies, along with biographies of lesser-known activists. All these new perspectives together emphasize the scale of a mass movement made up of hundreds of thousands of citizens with diverse goals, tactics, and results.

1.2.1. Framework

First of all, as time distances historians from the events they study, periods that once appeared sharply defined become more ambiguous, and this development changes contemporaries' thoughts. According to historian Tom Holt, "history is fundamentally and inescapably narrative in its use of time, plot, and causation."[112] How or why some event, development, or process happened can be explained through a narrative of causes and consequences. Discussing differences in historical interpretations and opposing historical narratives helps students to participate in history as "an ongoing conversation and debate."[113] Where and how historians begin and end their histories is a choice, and this fundamentally affects how stories in the history books are told.

In explaining the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, the historical context is crucial. Revisionist historians contribute to the historical debate concerning the Civil Rights

[110] Frost, "Using "Master Narratives" to Teach History,"442.
[111] Ibidem, 443.
[112] Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1990), 10-11.
[113] Holt, *Thinking Historically*, 13.

Movement by presenting different views on what decade marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. According to the master narrative, the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement spans the years 1954 or 1955—either the Brown v. Board of Education or the Montgomery bus boycott is the starting point—to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Charles Payne calls this "the Montgomery to Memphis framework."[114] This perspective that emphasizes national issues is called the "top-down perspective". It implicitly credits the success of the Movement to King's charisma, white liberal politicians, northern white patronage, the labor-liberal alliance, and the exposure of southern violence on television.[115]

However, the revisionists deviate from the master narrative timeframe. A fourth wave of historians and social scientists, like Jeanne F. Theoharis, Robert O Self, Nikhil Pal Singh, and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall abandoned the 1954/55 timeframe, and argued that its origins lay in the 1930s and 1940s, and that it extended to the 1980s.[116] According to Hall, the "civil rights unionism" of the 1930s and 1940s was its first phase.[117] Others go further back in time to the "slave politics" of the nineteenth century, like Steven Hahn.[118] All these clashing interpretations are represented in a new paradigm called the "Long Movement". [119] The revisionist scholars of this interpretative framework agree that the short timeframe that the master narrative presents of the Movement underplays the salience of earlier periods of struggle as well as what comes after.[120] According to the Long Movement or the "black freedom struggle" paradigm as Theoharis calls it, the modern Civil Rights Movement transcends the historical period of 1955-1975, because this time framework was the culmination of prior behind the scenes networking.[121]

However, the danger of the continuous 1930s-1970s timeline theorized by Long Movement scholars is that it ignores "the wide-ranging federal counterintelligence operations directed against militant black activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s."[122] According to Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, it is not possible to posit an unbroken chain of insurgency from the 1930s-1940s to the 1970s-1980s. They agree with Adam Fairclough that,

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[114] Charles Payne, "The View from the Trenches," in Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) 110.
[115] Cha-Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 266.
[116] Ibidem, 267.
[117] Ibidem, 267.
[118] Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Belknap Press, April 2005)
[119] Cha-Jua "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 265.
[120] Payne, "The View from the Trenches," 110.
[121] Cha-Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 270.
[122] Ibidem, 273.

"in stressing history's 'seamless web,' [Long Movement scholars] turn history into a homogenized mush, without sharp breaks, and clear transitions and transformations."[123]

Thus, the adequacy of the Long Movement theory is questionable. However, it did pursue a more interactive model that recognized the need to connect the local with the national. It recognized that the Civil Rights Movement was not a national social movement but a series of local struggles. Racism did not just exist in the South, it was a nationwide problem.[124] Thus, researchers started examining the relationship between national institutions and local activists, whites and blacks, men and women, and between predecessors and contemporaries.[125] Lawson argues that it is crucial that scholars focus on the grassroots level, because than they can address the legacy of black radicalism, and whether the freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a continuation of a previous protest tradition or the start of a new one.[126]

1.2.2. Goals

The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the Brown v. Board of Education declared racially segregated public schools as unconstitutional. This crucial turning point in the history of the United States gave African Americans "an unprecedented opportunity to begin anew the painstaking process of what has always been ... a distant goal: total integration into the cultural fabric of the United States."[127] After this decision, civil rights activists moved from a reactive to a proactive stage in their struggle to become first-class citizens.[128]

Another crucial event in the history of the Civil Rights Movement was the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It not only established King as leader for the Movement, but it also opened the eyes of African Americans to the strength and power they had when united in their struggle. It led to commitment, high hopes, and ideas.[129] Therefore, the fundamental intention of formal black leaders of the Movement was to speak for and act on behalf of all black people. However, in order to fulfill their goals, Robnett notes, black leaders had to persuade white leaders and do concessions to make sure that white politics would not crush the Movement entirely.[130]Besides the formal leaders who were busy with the state apparatus,

[123] Ibidem, 273.
[124] Ibidem, 265.
[125] Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 457.
[126] Ibidem, 464.
[127] Harry A. Ploski, and Roscoe Conkling Brown, *The Negro Almanac* (New York: Bellweath 1967) 22.
[128] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 631.
[129] Ibidem, 631.
[130] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 28.

there were also bridge leaders who focused on the community. They worked day to day with the people, unconcerned with the desires of the state. Bridge leaders were of great importance for the community because they gave the people a voice. Ella Baker was a typical bridge leader who believed that the world could be transformed through collective action. In the third chapter, her vital role within the Civil Rights Movement will be discussed in more detail.

Initially, the main goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to attain political and legislative rights. This eventually evolved into a Movement to exercise those rights. According to Fairclough, it comprised a larger "black freedom struggle seeking a broad range of goals."[131] New candidates adopted, changed, and extended upon old repertoires of previous protest groups. Methods of protest varied and activists could be divided on the issues of which repertoires ought to be used and how. These factors created some conflict between the bridge leaders and the formal leaders. This was, for example, the case between Ella Baker and Martin Luther King. The incompatibility between the national charismatic spokesperson and one of its most effective grassroots organizers had substantial consequences for the development of the Movement.[132] Baker left the SCLC staff in 1960 because in her eyes, King did not identify enough with the common people he sought to lead. He did not situate himself among them. She argued that King was a product of a dominant culture that promotes egocentrism. "[People] just have to have these high-powered individuals to worship…it's the culture we're in."[133] Shifting rules and gaining rights through legislation was not enough to produce significant changes in attitudes. Meaningful changes depended on culture shifts.

Thus, the goals of the Civil Rights Movement activists were not just political or legislative. In particularly African American women were more concerned with achieving social, psychological, or cultural goals. In their role as leaders, they helped people in their communities to shape their goals, and to encourage them to become self-empowered. They wanted to make things better in their communities. With this in mind, it becomes clear why black women did not see themselves as traditional leaders.[134]

[131] Adam Fairclough, "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement," 388.
[132] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 189.
[133] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 191.
[134] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 644.

1.2.3. Leadership

The image of the leader of a Civil Rights Movement according to the master narrative, is that of a formal, rational Black male leader who is in control of the activities to which he leads his followers. He is a strong elite male who stands firmly behind the traditional organizational tactics and goals of the Movement.[135] The revisionists refute the "great man" theory of leadership by including the leadership roles of contemporary southern black women in the modern Civil Rights Movement. These women were fighting from the bottom for racial equality, and they performed roles that by any standard would consider them "heroes" or "leaders" of the Movement.[136] Still, their leadership roles and contributions were neglected in the popular image of the Civil Rights Movement.

Civil rights activists Septima Clark, and Ella Baker argued that black ministers' authoritarian views of leadership prevented women from assuming command of any of the organizations.[137] In light of this form of gender inequality, it is remarkable that any woman achieved positions of authority at all. Kathleen Cleaver, involved in the Black Panther Party, insisted that "[the men] are cutting themselves short and they're selling the struggle short because the women have as much to give as the men."[138] Despite the exclusion of black women from top positions and the little acknowledgement they received from both black and white men, their contributions were crucial for the success of the Movement. Black women created the organization and made people feel a part of it. They operated at network centers, mobilized existing social networks, mediated conflicts, and coordinated activity.[139] In short, they created and sustained good relations, and solidarity among co-workers.[140]

With this in mind, John Dittmer, Charles Payne, and many other revisionists argue for the significance of people organizing at the grassroots level in their local communities.[141] According to Peter B. Levy, "looked at from the bottom up perspective, the civil rights movement was a mass movement that empowered hundreds of thousands of ordinary people."[142] Furthermore, leadership, fundraising, and networks that emerged from the "bottom

[135] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 28.
[136] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," 163.
[137] Anne Standley, "The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement" in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 184.
[138] Sister Julia Herve, "Black Scholar Interviews Kathleen Cleaver," *The Black Scholar* (December 1971) 55.
[139] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized," 8.
[140] Ibidem, 8, 9.
[141] Frost, "Using "Master Narratives" to Teach History," 440.
[142] Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (University Press of Florida, 2003) 183.

up" explained the development and successes of the Movement.[143] Recent years have seen an extended growth in local studies that examined grassroots organizations. Dittmer and Payne have been advocating an indigenous perspective on the local people, lesser-known (female) leaders, and working-class activists.[144] However, concentrating more on bottom-up factors in explaining the causes of the Civil Rights Movement does not mean neglecting top-down ones. Both were relevant and determined the success of the Movement. For instance, King's leadership was influential during its time and therefore requires careful historical analysis, rather than "the simplified, mythic portrait presented by the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement."[145]

[143] Frost, "Using "Master Narratives" to Teach History", 440.
[144] Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," in *The Journal of African American History*, Vol.92., No.2 (Spring, 2007) 267.
[145] Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1987) 452.

Conclusion

The master narrative is shaped by ideas of gender that create false ideas of the movement. The view of the Civil Rights Movement most commonly represented in the history books, the media, and in popular culture is a one-sided perspective of the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. The historical narratives and public memory have offered a male dominated movement, while the contributions of women are often restricted to one name, namely Rosa Parks, without attention to her organizational work. Public tokens of recognition that were investigated in this chapter, like street signs, buildings, and public holidays are mostly male memorials. They largely obscure that the movement was built on the courageous and determined efforts of everyday people. Although the Civil Rights Movement left its mark in the film industry. There are few films about the girls and women of the Civil Rights Movement. Fortunately, recent films like *Selma* help bring a new perspective on this critical part of history.

Despite the growth of recent civil rights scholarship focusing on local contexts and on gender, national headline-making events and charismatic male leaders still dominate the American cultural memory, most evident in celebrations of the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. However, at the dedication of a memorial to Martin Luther King in Washington in 2013, President Obama made a remark on the importance of the "invisible activists." He said, "There are the multitudes of men and women whose names never appear in the history books. Those who marched and those who sang, those who sat in and those who stood firm. Those who organized and those who mobilized - all those men and women …faceless, anonymous, relentless young people, black and white, [who] have taken our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. To those men and women, those foot soldiers for justice, know that this monument is yours as well."[146] He also credited "giants of the Civil Rights Movement" like Rosa Parks and Dorothy Height, Benjamin Hooks, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, for their strength and courage.

So, hopefully there will be more expressions of memorialization about the girls and women of the Civil Rights Movement in the future. Their stories are not only significant as firsthand accounts of black women's experiences of civil rights era events, but also as memory texts that illuminate the inconsistency between individual testimony and cultural

[146] "Obama dedicates MLK Memorial" August 23, 2013 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-dedicates-mlk-memorial/> 12-7-2015.

memory. To rectify the false idea of the Civil Rights Movement created by a gender shaped master narrative, it is necessary to look more closely at female leadership and its goals. But first, this chapter will be followed by an analysis on why black women's roles were invisible in the Civil Rights Movement by focusing on specific factors in both the black community and the American society at large.

Chapter 2

The Representation of Female Activists in the Civil Rights Movement

"The women ... were extremely strong.... These were women who had never finished grade school, never mind high school, who'd never gone to college, or never seen college. They came out of the fields, whose parents sometimes had not even gone to the first grade. Some of their parents had been slaves. They were just a lesson of strength and encouragement ... women whose homes were burned down, women who lost their jobs... who saw what the future held or might hold if we took the chance and fought for it. (Mrs. J)"[147]

Women from all layers of society were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. The so called 'sisters in struggle' consisted of sharecroppers, domestic and service workers, schoolteachers, college professors, housewives, beauticians, students, and office secretaries.[148] They shared their resources, talents and skills, such as courage, strength, and patience to form a strong sisterhood for their work in the movement.[149] They crossed all barriers and classes. Black women did not just fulfill traditional female roles of nurturing and caretaking. Furthermore, their contributions were not just limited to music, art and literature since. For example, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a White person, Daisy Bates's struggle to integrate Little Rock Central High School, and JoAnn Robinson and the Women's Political Council's call for a citywide bus boycott all motivated and inspired the Civil Rights Movement.[150] As Vicki Crawford would say, "they were major leaders, organizers, and strategists who helped to mold and shape the direction that the Movement would take."[151]

However, the black community and the American society at large forced women to play roles in the Movement that tended to be invisible due to racism, sexism, and classism. Therefore, the main emphasis in this chapter is to show how these three interlocking systems of oppression restricted women to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. First, how was female political activism perceived within the Civil Rights Movement and within the American society in general? To what extent were women able to play active roles in the Movement, and what factors might explain why women were less incorporated in the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement?

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[147] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 634.
[148] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," 163.
[149] Vicki L. Crawford, "We shall not be moved: Black Female Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights movement" Doctoral Dissertation, Department of History, (Emory University, 1987) 47-48.
[150] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 633.
[151] Crawford, "Beyond the Human Self," 13.

2.1 Gender and Inequality in 1950s-1960s Society

In order to determine how female political activism was perceived within the Civil Rights Movement and within the American society in general in the 1950s and 1960s, it is necessary to analyze the gender relations of that time period. How was the position of women in the white community in the age of the pre-second wave of feminism? Were the gender relations in the Black community similar to their white counterpart? According to Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, U.S. women historians paid less attention to the years from 1945 to 1960, since women of the postwar era were considered "less interesting than women workers during World War II or political activists of the 1960s."[152] Postwar women were often reduced to the image of middle-class housewives. However, this stereotypical reasoning flattens the history of women, and therefore it is crucial to analyze the factors that contributed to the traditional gender relations in both white and black American families in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1.1. Gender Roles in Society at Large

The image of womanhood in American society during the 1950s and 1960s is characterized by the stereotypical view of the quintessential white middle-class housewife who moved to the suburbs and stayed at home to take care of the family.[153] The man was the breadwinner while the woman took care of the household and the children. This was the same in the African American community. Even though African American women have historically worked both in- and outside the home and engaged in public and political activities, the primacy of women's domestic roles was also emphasized among the black middle class.[154] A traditional gender relationship ensured stability after the troubled years of the Second World War. Furthermore, Elaine Tyler May's study of families in the 1950s, *Homeward Bound*, found that white middle-class Americans found security in a family that domesticated and subordinated women.[155]

Moreover, the "cult of domesticity", a term invented by feminist scholars in the late 1960s, restricted many American women to a life defined by their role as homemakers, mothers, and wives.[156] The rhetoric of the Cold War competition contributed to the cult of domesticity. American leaders wanted to demonstrate the superiority of the nation's

[152] Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Temple University Press, 1994) 2.
[153] Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 1.
[154] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 194.
[155] Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 3.
[156]Brian Ward, *The 1960s: A Documentary Reader* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010) 125.

institutions and values, and thus women had to commit to their role as wives and mothers. Undersecretary of Labor James O'Connel remarked; "When a woman comes to be viewed as a source of manpower, second as a mother, then I think we are losing much that supposedly separates us from the Communist world."[157] So, in the 1960s American women learned that truly feminine women did not admire careers, higher educations or political rights. They had to give up the independence and the opportunities that feminists fought for years before.[158] Historian of the modern U.S. South Brian Ward notes that some women did not even mind their traditional, gendered role and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."[159] Millions of women wanted to be perfect wives and mothers, and they wanted the men to make the major decisions. Betty Freedan wrote for periodicals like *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Redbook* and she stated that these magazines stimulated the picture of the perfect modern American housewife. They pictured women as "frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex babies and home."[160]

However, while many women fitted the stereotype of traditional homemaker, many others did not. Not all were white, middleclass, married, and suburban, neither were they wholly domestic. According to Meyerowtiz, most women stepped outside of the boundaries of the suburban middleclass home, and were more complex than often portrayed in scholarly historical accounts of the postwar years.[161] By the mid-1950s, rates of married women's employment grew by forty-two percent. By 1960, thirty percent of married women were employed, and thirty-nine percent of all mothers with school-aged children were in the labor force.[162] Although the 1950s and early 1960s saw a rise in paid employment of married women and growing numbers of college-educated women, large groups of women could not benefit from this positive development.[163] According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only about one-third of all women participated in the paid labor force in the 1950s.[164]

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[157] Susan M. Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years" in: Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Temple University Press, 1994) 86.
[158] Ward, *The 1960s: A Documentary Reader*, 126.
[159] Ibidem, 128.
[160] Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000) 181, 182.
[161] Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Temple University Press, 1994) 2.
[162] Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years," 86.
[163] Barbara J. Love, *Feminists who Changed America, 1963-1975* (University of Illinois Press, 2006) vii.
[164] Mark Brenner and Stephanie Luce, "Women and Class: What Has Happened in Forty Years?" in *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* Vol.58, No.03 (July-August 2006) Web. 2-08-2015.

Although the 1950s was the decade of the family, it was also the start of the two-income family. "Women were twenty-nine percent of the workforce in 1950, thirty-five percent in 1965, and forty percent by 1975."[165] And that figure would continue to increase. Marriage and gender roles were also greatly affected in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of social movements. In 1975, a law was passed that allowed married women to get loans and credit cards on their own name without their husband's permission. And, employers could no longer require women to stay single to maintain their jobs.[166] Thus, besides the popular assumption that women had to stay home and take care of the family, a subtle shift in government policy encouraged women to take jobs during the 1950s.

2.1.2. Gender Roles in the Black Community

Like White women, African American women faced many barriers during their lives that prevented them from living as freely as they hoped. Particularly in the South, patriarchy structured white and black women's experiences. Due to the strict traditional gender stratification within the black community, "women obeyed and supported their husbands, looked up to them as leaders, and did not even take credit even if it was offered."[167] A veteran civil rights leader pointed out that patriarchy historically has constrained all women in American society. "When Europeans came to America, women had to take a back seat to males. . . . Men didn't do the work that women did and yet they got all the praises. This European patriarchal influence is evident not just among blacks but also among Whites.... Women don't get credit and praised for the work they do because that's how the white European traditions sets things up."[168]

A striking example of a woman who did not want to emasculate her husband is described in the biography of civil rights leader Ella Baker. She never told that she was a married woman. Bernice Johnson Reagon recalled that "it was one of the few things she just wouldn't talk about."[169] Joyce Ladner says that "many people didn't even know Miss Baker had even been married; she was explicitly *Miss* Baker to most of her political associates."[170] Although her husband T.J. Roberts was not as politically active as Baker, he was a fighter in

[165] Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (OUP USA, 2003) 301.
[166] Marilyn Coleman, Lawrence H. Ganong, and Kelly Warzinik, *Family Life in 20th-century America* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007) 23.
[167] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," 175.
[168] Ibidem, 175.
[169] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 102.
[170] Ibidem, 102.

his own way. He was willing to fight for his loved ones, and he left the political battles to his wife.[171] Because of her strong role as a female leader, Baker did not want to risk that her husband's position would be weakened. As Robnett argues, the black middle class emphasized the primacy of women's domestic roles, and the leadership roles of black men was interwoven with the position of black women and their children in society.[172]

Kathleen Cleaver observed that black women encountered signs of patriarchy and sexism while she worked for SNCC. She noticed that while women did most of the work, few of them acquired leadership positions because black males did not take them seriously. Women carried a "double burden of their jobs and their duties as wives and mothers, and also had to contend with the male staff members' refusal to accept them as equals."[173] Black men developed sexist attitudes, says Cleaver, because they resented the "strong" role black women had gained for being breadwinners as well as mothers.[174] "To regain a sense of manhood…and to become strong enough… to fights against the oppressor, they many times take out their resentment of their position against their own black women."[175] For example, Martin Luther King related to women in a limited capacity because he was a typical male chauvinist. He believed that the wife should stay at home and take care of the children while he would be out on the streets.[176] In addition, through school and church institutions, working-class blacks also followed certain patriarchal family practices and restricted gender roles. The educated elite taught them to hold on to the White middleclass gender norms. According to Barbara Ransby, "restrictive norms of masculinity and femininity were part of the mainstream, middle-class approach to social change and to leadership roles."[177] On the other hand, in aspiring to middleclass goals of upward mobility and wealth, blacks tolerated a structure of economic inequality. "Blacks' acceptance of a capitalist economy which required a hierarchy, in which the fortunes of a few came from the exploitation of many, oppresses them."[178]

However, during their participation in social movements, black women have always expressed their hope in the possibility of progress. They been active in the fight for racial, and

[171] Ibidem, 103.
[172] Ibidem, 42, 184.
[173] Standley, "The Role of Black Women," 197.
[174] Ibidem, 199.
[175] Herve, "Black Scholar Interviews Kathleen Cleaver," 59.
[176] "Sexism in the Civil Rights Movement: A Discussion Guide" (September 2007) <http://www.tolerance.org/article/sexism-civil-rights-movement-discussion-guide> 10 June 2015.
[177] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 297.
[178] Standley, "The Role of Black Women," 193.

gender equality but often found themselves positioned between the two struggles.[179] Rural blacks and grassroots organizers were harassed and became therefore severely economic dependent. Beginning in 1964 and continuing each summer until 1968, economic discrimination fueled urban rebellions in black communities around the country.[180] In comparison to White women, Black women had far more limited job opportunities.[181] Therefore, education was a high priority for both groups. Education was one of the keys to self-empowerment and political and economic freedom. "As people have started motion and agitation in their communities, they have discovered that they need an education… For, education is not the development of intellectual skills, but a preparation for participation in living."[182] Citizenship Schools provided citizenship education for democratic empowerment and soon they spread throughout the South during the 1960s.[183] Along with the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, these Schools laid the groundwork for significant and real gains for the working class and the rural black communities. Civil rights activists stated that the Citizenship Schools were one of the most effective tools of the Movement because through the classes black men and women learned about their rights and about the importance of voting.[184]

2.2. Gender Inequality in the Civil Rights Movement

As shown in the previous sections, patriarchal structures within the society at large and within the black community prevented women from living as freely and independently as they hoped. But what did this imply for women's positions in the Civil Rights Movement? How are gender relations in the American society at large reflected in roles assigned to women in the Civil Rights Movement? To answer this question, this section explains how factors like gender, sexism, class, and media coverage influenced the role of women in the main civil rights organizations such as SCLC, NAACP and SNCC.

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[179] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 8.
[180] Bettye Collier-Thomas, V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-black Power Movement* (YU Press, 2001) 230.
[181] Hartman, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years," 91.
[182] Charles Cobb, "Some Notes on Education" 3. <http://www.crmvet.org/info/cobb_education.pdf> 12-06-2015.
[183] Sandra B. Oldendorf, "The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961" in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 169.
[184] Oldendorf, "The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961," 169, 180.

2.2.1. Sexism in Civil Rights Organizations

African-American women faced a double burden. They experienced oppression for being African-American as well as for being a woman, and therefore had to confront many barriers to achieve first-class citizenship. As mentioned in the previous section, sexism tended to demote black and white women to nonexecutive positions because the organizational structure of the Civil Rights Movements was based on a male-dominated hierarchy.[185] Men had a higher status in society, making them the ultimate threat for power. Women were less viewed as threats, therefore men overshadowed them particularly in political roles and events.

The sexism that was present in the Civil Rights Movement was a continuation of the oppressive mentality that existed in the larger U.S. culture, which was and is a white male dominated culture. Therefore, to safeguard the political, educational, social, and economic rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination, Moorfield Storey, Mary White Ovington, and W. E. B. Du Bois formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.[186] The organization challenged the conservative political tendencies among African American leaders and responded to the shameless racism of white society. As in other political organizations, the NAACP had never elected a woman as its executive secretary. They were often excluded from the informal inner circle of decision makers. However, eventually the NAACP gave women like Ella Baker the opportunity to wield considerable influence at a local level, and perhaps to a lesser extent nationally.[187] Yet, she was not comfortable with the leadership roles of W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White. She argued that both men had a great sense of ego and self-importance. Baker was not an organizer who modeled herself after high-profile, public figures. [188] Her philosophy was "Power to the People" and she wanted regular folks to become involved.[189] However, soon after, the NAACP's diverse group of male and female members broadened their focus and included the fight for women's equality and suffrage into the program. The female members eventually founded groups such as the National Woman's Suffrage Association, and National Association of Colored Women.[190]

Another civil rights organization that was relatively open for women was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). African-American women activists played a

[185] McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement" 170.
[186] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement,* 106, 107.
[187] Ibidem, 106.
[188] Ibidem, 109.
[189] Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," 595.
[190] Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (SAGE Publications, 2008) 591.

major role in its founding and development despite the traditional definitions of sex roles.[191] SNCC was anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical, and the group was willing to work with sharecroppers as well as doctors. "Through an ideology of inclusion, cooperation and individualism as opposed to self-interest, SNCC broke down barriers to participation, seeking not to indoctrinate but to engage. SNCC's philosophy was based on grassroots popular democracy and on undermining traditional class and gender hierarchies.[192] This organizational form made it possible to incorporate women as leaders. Robnett points out that, SNCC was revolutionary in a political sense because of the organization's fluid and decentralized nature. Additionally, SNCC was also groundbreaking in its widening of the socially constructed cultural norms surrounding race, class, and gender."[193] Had SNCC been more traditional, black women had much less chance to assume leadership positions.

Nevertheless, in November 1964, two white SNCC workers, Casey Hayden and Mary King, wrote a controversial position paper on the position of women in the group. The paper described the situation that women faced within SNCC itself. For example, it states, "A veteran of two years' work for SNCC in two states spends her day typing and doing clerical work for other people in her project," and "Any woman in SNCC, no matter what her position or experience, has been asked to take minutes in a meeting when she and other women are outnumbered by men."[194] In these two described situations female members were placed in positions below their skill level, while less qualified males were placed above them. The paper ends with the notion that hopefully people come to understand that there should come an end to the male oppression of women, and the white oppression of blacks. It can be considered as a pioneering statement of the modern women's liberation movement, and as an example for other Civil Rights Movements.

A civil rights organization that was more closely associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It was a confederation of established and newly formed organizations and the central core of the planning board was comprised of either individual churches or community organizations such as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).[195] Ella Baker served as associate director of SCLC. She had to run the day-to-day organization of the office, and later she served as acting executive director. The term "acting" indicates that Baker was nonclergy and thus never considered as

[191] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized" 3.
[192] Collier-Thomas, *Sisters in the Struggle*, 43.
[193] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?* 194.
[194] "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement," 1/3.
[195] Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," 597.

the legitimate leader.[196] Furthermore she found herself often at odds with the ministers due to their chauvinist treatment of the female staff.

The confrontations between Baker and SCLC originated from their different understandings of leadership. Baker said, "I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role. The competition wasn't worth it."[197] In this statement she referred to the specific leadership of King as well. Baker was not afraid to confront him and the other the male leaders of SCLC because she disapproved King's autocratic style of leadership.[198] She said, "I wasn't a fashion plate," and "I did not hesitate in voicing my opinion and..."[199] For Baker, it was hard to understand how men like King, who believed so strongly in racial equality, could also believe in oppressing women who wanted to contribute. This encouraged Baker to make a stand against the subservient role of women in social movements and to develop local leadership among women in the communities.

Like Baker, many other women criticized dominant gender roles in either written or verbal expressions.[200] Septima Clark criticized the sexism of King and other members of the SCLC staff. "I had a great feeling that Dr. King didn't think much of women either… the American Field Service Committee wanted me to speak… I never did get the chance to do any speaking to the AFS committee in London or to any of the other groups."[201] However, Clark admits that she was also blind to the sexism in SCLC's leadership while she worked there. "I supported [King] in every way I could because I greatly respected his courage, his service to others, and his non-violence. The way I think about him now comes from my own experience in the women's movement."[202] James Cone insists that King made a "glaring" failure by not critiquing sexism within the Movement. King's attitude was disproportionately insensitive as becomes clear in his record of his arrest in Albany, Georgia. Males are referred to by name and title, while women are referred to as "ladies", thus a nameless, faceless mass.[203]

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[196] Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," 597.
[197] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy," 64.
[198] Standley, "The Role of Black Women" 194.
[199] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 184.
[200] Ibidem, 310.
[201] Septima Clark, *Ready From Within* (Navarro, California: Wild Tree Press, 1986) 77.
[202] Clark, *Ready From Within*, 78.
[203] Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," 597.

Thus, black women did contribute to the main civil rights organizations, but they were often forced to play invisible roles and suffered from a lack of recognition. However, they did not let themselves be pushed into the role of followers. Instead they proved to be agents of change. Ella Baker challenged notions of sexism and patriarchy, and played a major role in influencing the policies of the NAACP, SNCC, and SCLC. However, Baker soon left SCLC to focus fulltime on SNCC where she supported the students by helping them acquire the skills they needed to organize effectively and train local leaders.Unlike leader-centered groups like SCLC, SNCC did not revolve around one well-known figure. Instead, members worked together to organize, seeing themselves as catalysts in building local movements and that corresponded to Baker's philosophy on leadership. But, as the SNCC position paper reveals, the position of women in the group suffered from male oppression. So, even a civil rights organization that was relatively open to female participation was not completely free of gender inequality or sexism.

2.2.2. Class in the Civil Rights Movement

Women's positions and power in the Civil Rights Movement depended for a large part on class, and the region they grew up in. Most black grew up in the plantation economy with its sharecropping system and repressive mechanisms of social control.[204] Those who grew up in the South, experienced exploitation at a very young age. The oppressive sharecropping system was designed to maintain economic imbalance in favor of white people. The system kept Blacks poor and whites economically secure.[205] The sharecropping system kept blacks tied to the land they worked thus this influenced female participation in the Civil Rights Movements. Due to sexism and patriarchy in the black community, the women had to devote the rest of the time to social roles that were expected of them, such as taking care of the family and the household, and being active in church or social organizations. This meant that all the civil rights activities, such as networking, building cooperatives, maintaining social contacts, and the registration of voters, had to take place within these confines. This situation was even truer when black women got into conflict with the dangerous and violent white Southern society. Anyone who joined the Civil Rights Movement had to be aware that participation could place him or herself, and every adult in his or her family at risk.[206]

[204] Cha-Jua, "The "Long Movement" as Vampire," 281.
[205] Jacqueline Grant, "Civil Rights Women: A Source for Doing Womanist Theology " in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 41
[206] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized,"4.

Examined SNCC's newsletters from 1962 and 1963 put forward that some of the most violent incidents of reprisals took place against women, even if they were rumored to be part of an organization[207] Charles Payne has interviewed some of these women and he revealed that every adult women got fired, except those who quite because they expected to get fired.[208] If they and their families were penalized for civil rights activity it often meant more poverty, or an assault in the form of drive-by shootings, and bombings. These form of violence were not just reprisal against individuals, but against complete family units.[209]

Female activists often had to endure severe reprisals like beatings and sexual harassments in jail. Black people who tried to register to vote in the South were likely to face these kinds of serious hardships, and Hamer had learned this by painful experience. On June 9, 1963, Hamer and several fellow activists were returning from a literacy workshop in Charleston, South Carolina. Stopping in Winona, Mississippi, the group was arrested on a false charge and jailed.[210] Once in jail, Hamer and her colleagues were severely beaten by the police in. In a compelling speech as a MFDP delegate at the Democratic National Convention, Hamer recounted how she had been assaulted. "The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat until he was exhausted… The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the state highway patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat to set on my feet and keep me from working my feet. I began to scream, and one white man got up and began to beat me on my head and tell me to 'hush'."[211] Stories like Hamer's of sexual abuse and violence in Southern jails rarely reached a mass audience during the 1960s. Also, the women who observed civil rights projects, "seemed to be more comfortable doing…community service and moral uplift, than documenting sexual abuse on the frontlines of the freedom struggle."[212]

In order to survive in these harsh circumstances in the Southern rural context, middleclass women had to work. The majority of these women were part-time workers, since the household and the family were their priorities. Therefore, social expectations to conform to gender roles determined what jobs were appropriate for women. One's racial background and class position was also a determinative factor.[213] Thus, middle-class women were often

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[207] Ibidem, 4.
[208] Ibidem, 4.
[209] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized," 4.
[210] "Biography Fannie Lou Hamer" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/freedomsummer-hamer/> Web. 23-07-2015.
[211] Fannie Lou Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired", in S*peeches of Fannie Lou Hamer, To Tell It Like It Is.* <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/flh64.htm>Web. 27-07-2015.
[212] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance- A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 2010) 164.
[213] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 123.

confined to 'gender' jobs like school teacher or nurse. Black women often worked as household domestics, some of the lowest paid work in America, due to the fact they were black, poor, and female.[214] Furthermore, since these were not completely independent positions because they were paid by Whites, they could easily lose their work. Men did not have to worry about this because they could become black independent business owners. This gave them more room for open civil rights activity. Thus, most women were limited to jobs that men did not want to do, or that were qualified as "women's occupations." Moreover, in the 1950s, it was assumed in American society "that only women could care adequately for children", and that men would never take the responsibility for household chores.

Finally, class also played an important role within the black community since social values were associated with class. Most black women came from a lower socio-economic class. Those from the middleclass were more likely to be pushed into the traditional visible role. Political respectability required middle-class dignity.[215] Thus when black activist were looking for someone to become the symbol of the integration struggle, this had to be a respectable middle-class person who would get the black community into action. Rosa Parks became this symbol when she was famously arrested for not giving up her bus seat to a white man. But Parks' civil rights protest did have a precedent, namely teenager Claudette Colvin. She was arrested for the same offense nine months earlier. At first, civil rights leader E.D. Nixon thought he had found the perfect person, but Colvin turned out to be pregnant. It was thought that shining a spotlight on a pregnant black teenager would only fuel white stereotypes of black women's uninhibited sexuality."[216] Furthermore, Colvin did not have a middleclass background like Rosa Parks. "Colvin's dark skin color and her working-class status made her a political liability in certain part of the black community. Colvin's mother was a maid and her father did yard work."[217] Thus, Parks was a better candidate to become spokeswoman because of her employment, marital status, along with her good standing in the community. This example shows that class was an important and a determinative factor for Black female participation within the Civil Rights Movement.

[214] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 183.
[215] McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 76.
[216] Ibidem, 76.
[217] Ibidem, 75.

2.2.3 Media and the Civil Rights Movement

The media has played a pivotal role in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Professor of History Emily Rosenberg, in America "there is increasingly no effective memory or history outside of media, broadly defined."[218] Thus, to get their message across a wider audience, civil rights activists utilized the mass media. "Of all the 1960s movements," Edward P. Morgan says, "the Civil Rights Movement was probably the most successful in using the media to mobilize sympathetic national support for its cause."[219] For explaining and interpreting the meaning of civil rights events during the sixties, the American people turned to mass media coverage.

Positive media coverage also helped to strengthen the image of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civic male leaders as "good" charismatic male spokespersons.[220] The mass media embraced a market-driven emphasis on personality as a key signifier of political meaning. Thus, "charismatic leaders fit the media's emphasis on conflict and celebrity and the public's demand for mythic leaders and heroic sacrifices."[221] Civil rights activists came to recognize the enormous importance of the media spotlight. The signal stories of public memory juxtaposed King and the Movement against violent white racists in the South.[222] Sympathetic news coverage not only helped to spread awareness and to recruit new members, but also to enhance the image of the charismatic male spokesmen.

However, not all civil rights activists believed that this was the way to mobilize thousands or millions of people. For example, Ella Baker did not had the urge to show herself on television. "You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders." She criticized the American culture for that fact that charismatic leaders only had to find a spot in the limelight to become a leader. "[When a male leader] has been touted through the public media, [that] means that the media made him, and the media may undo him."[223] For Baker it was more important to serve than to look after her own status. She was convinced that leaders who stood in the center of public attention, often lost their credibility as civil rights workers

[218] Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten," 138.
[219] Ibidem, 140.
[220] Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, xviii.
[221] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 51.
[222] Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten" 148.
[223] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 64.

and organizers, since they were too busy with their new celebrity status.[224] When Baker and King worked together for SCLC, Baker was the one who developed the organizational structure, while King was preoccupied with his responsibilities such as giving speeches, and dealing with the media.[225]

Thus, the media focused completely on King as SCLC's singular charismatic leader. The fact that women activists worked behind the scenes, like Baker, also did not contribute to gain more publicity. Furthermore, media attention helped male leaders to attract a large group of supporters and this made it even more difficult for women to attain leadership positions. Thus, media coverage was also gendered in the sense that the American people were mostly confronted with male leaders of the Civil Rights Movement on television. The media turned the charismatic male spokesperson into acceptable leader in the eyes of the American public.

[224] Miller, *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited*, 100.
[225] Ibidem, 93.

Conclusion

Black women were not visible in the Civil Rights Movement master narrative because social and gendered structures in the society at large, and in the Black community delegated them to play invisible roles in different areas in- and outside of civil rights organizations. Race, gender, and class constraints hindered them from becoming the recognized articulators, spokespersons, and media favorites. Thus, for most women the ladder up to a position of formal leadership was beyond their reach. At home, they had to devote their time to social roles expected of them, which mostly revolved around household tasks. The position and working patterns of women on the labor market also reflected prevailing attitudes towards gender roles. They were confined to jobs such as schoolteacher or domestic worker that were not independent or permanent. If they chose to be politically active, they had to face the risks of physical abuse, loss of employment, destruction of property, and their own family's lives. So, gender and class relations that existed in the American society at large, and that were also clearly present in the media coverage, were reflected in roles assigned to women in- and outside the Movement. Nevertheless, Black women nevertheless performed roles that would consider them as heroes and leaders of the Movement.[226] Within organizations like the NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC, their behind-the scenes-roles involved, initiating protests, formulating strategies and tactics, and mobilizing other resources, like money, personnel, and communication networks, necessary for successful collective action.[227] The final chapter will analyze why these roles were so vital for the existence of the Civil Rights Movement.

[226] Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," 163.
[227] Ibidem, 163.

Chapter 3

Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks: Trailblazers of the Civil Rights Movement

Civil rights activists Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks set in motion a social revolution that would in less than a decade turn the American society upside down. These three women exhibited their leadership identities behind the scenes of civil rights organizations in the form of volunteers, organizers, and activists. Although confronted with the male-dominant force, Baker, Hamer, and Parks did not automatically support or follow the ideas and perspectives of the male leaders. According to Baker, "The movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women, since it came out of church…The number of women who carried the movement was much larger than that of men."[228] In other words, they did not let themselves get overshadowed.

By presenting three case studies on Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks, the aim in this chapter is to show why specifically their contributions, and that of black female activism in general, were essential for achieving the political and legislative goals presented in the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Each woman represents a specific feature of Black female activism. Belinda Robnett's framework on various leadership roles among large organizations and grassroots movement work will serve as a basis to distinguish the three activists. Thus, how essential were their forms of activism for the success of the Civil Rights Movement and have their contributions altered the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement?

[228] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 630.

3.1. Ella Baker: A Bridge Leader

"Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest."[229]

In 1964, civil rights activist Ella Josephine Baker spoke these words at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. These days, as the protests spread from Ferguson to Los Angeles sparked by the police killings of young black men, there seems to be a rebirth of a new Civil Rights Movement. Gaps between blacks and whites persist and many of the issues like poverty, unemployment, and racial disparities remain the same as they did in 1963 when African-Americans carried signs for equal rights, integrated schools, decent housing and an end to bias during the March on Washington. Ella Baker's words and crafts are still urgently relevant today. However she was not a household name outside the Civil Rights Movement, she did probably more to bring people on board of the Civil Rights Movement than anyone according to Duke University Professor William Chafe.[230] So, why was her role as a female civil rights activist so vital for the Civil Rights Movement and is she regarded as the backbone of the Civil Rights Movement? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at her philosophy on leadership and activism.

3.1.1. The Preacher and the Organizer

Ella Baker's career as a civil rights organizer and strategist spanned from 1931 to 1986. She began working for the civil rights organizations in 1927 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance where she was exposed to what she described as "a hotbed of radical thinking."[231] In 1930 she became involved with the Young Negroes Cooperative League which goal was to establish economic opportunities for the Black communities. Her work there solidified Baker's believes in group centered leadership that she advocated during her life.[232] She encouraged the idea of young people and women taking active leadership roles instead of elite men. Despite the fact that many of the female activists did not consider themselves leaders, Baker argued that women in higher positions were recognized by their communities as leaders. "I was labeled a leader, of course.... I was a leader in that I was doing what needed to be done. I was responding . . . to the everyday situations that were occurring

[229] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 335.
[230] "Ella Baker: The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1I6n9EGM5Y> Web. 04-08-2015.
[231] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 64.
[232] Ibidem, 83.

for all of us, and I was appreciated by the local communities including Orangeburg but also surrounding communities."[233] Historically, African American women have always been involved in activities aimed at better quality of life for the community as well as for society.[234] Since Baker's leadership was based on helping the community, she held some type of leadership responsibility within her community,

Throughout her life, Baker has always stressed the importance of community service and performing different forms of solidarity.[235] She believed that civil rights would be achieved only if people were committed to fighting for their rights and making decisions within their communities. Thus, it was important that there existed a strong bond among civil rights activists. Participation in the Movement had to feel like a "family affair." Women invited civil rights workers into their homes, giving them a place to sleep and eat.[236] They were willing to care and nurture one another, taking care of one another's children, exchanging responsibilities and offering financial support if necessary. Mutual aid played an integral role in the African-American tradition. Furthermore, Black women understood that there were degrees of activism that were based on fear, economic dependency, and domestic responsibilities so they were willing to help each other.[237] Being wives and mothers, black women had to share responsibilities in order to attend meetings or participate in boycotts. Although they faced domestic obligations, this did not prevent them from assuming their roles as activists.[238]

A major theme in Baker's life was the idea of "participatory democracy." This term is an outgrowth of social participation and required long-term commitment of an entire community and a radical change within the society system. "In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms."[239] By the term "radical" she meant that the root of the cause of the system needed to be understood before change could occur. This implied three things namely, "grassroots involvement by people in the decisions that affect their lives; the minimization of hierarchy and professionalization in organizations working for social change; and direct

[233] Gyant, "Passing the Torch," 643.
[234] Ibidem, 639.
[235] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement,* 44.
[236] Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized" 2.
[237] Crawford, "Beyond the Human Self" 25.
[238] Ibidem, 25.
[239] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 1.

action on the sources of injustice."[240] During her twenty years of political experience Baker was able to fulfill these three aspects. As the following section will demonstrate, Baker's distinct style of leadership helped to accomplish her dream of participatory democracy.[241]

3.1.2. Leadership Philosophy

Ella Baker is the primary example of a female bridge leader. As an activists she saw herself as a bridge across the social class divisions in the Black community. Robnett describes the term "bridge leaders" as "leaders who kept their hands on the pulse of the community. Their goal was to gain trust, to bridge the masses to the Movements, and to act in accord with their constituent's desires."[242] Baker's commitment to the community was formed during her childhood years which she remembers as a world of "family socialism."[243] She recalls that, "Your relationship to humans was far more important than your relationship to the amount of money that you made."[244] Baker's family was blessed with good fortune and emphasized the importance of sharing. Her grandfather, a former slave, and her mother, a well-known public speaker, were her role models.[245]

After her role as national director for the Young Negroes Cooperative League, Baker began working for the NAACP. She became field secretary and her main goal was to expand the organization across the country. She build a membership, supported fundraising, and fostered Black consciousness for civil rights.[246] These activities characterized a bridge leader because they worked day to day with people.[247] Throughout her career Baker never tried to be the focal point of any of the organizations for which she worked because the people in the community came first. This is the reason why Baker had difficulties with the leadership roles of W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White in the NAACP because both were filled with a great sense of self-importance. In an interview back in 1977, Baker was asked whether she had any difficulty in that job because she was a woman. She said she did not have any problems with that. "I think maybe a couple of things were positive assets for me. One is, as I told you, I had grown up playing baseball, and my man-woman relationships were on the basis of just being a human being, not a sex object…And also, I guess, my ego; I had been able to compete on

[240] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 56.
[241] Ransby, Ella *Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 167.
[242] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 28.
[243] Charles Payne, "Ella Baker and Models of Social Change," in *Signs* (Summer 1989) 886.
[244] Payne, "Ella Baker and Models of Social Change," 886.
[245] Danelle Moon, *Daily Life of Women during the Civil Rights Era* (ABC-CLIO, 2011) 134, 135.
[246] Moon, *Daily Life of Women during the Civil Rights Era*, 135.
[247] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 28.

levels such as scholarship, without attempting to. And I could stand my own in debate…I wasn't delicate, to put it [unclear]. And I was very much interested in people, which was an asset that could serve me well because it could also break through whatever class lines had been either established or that were tenuously there, which frequently surfaced."[248] Her attitude towards powerful male leaders shows that she was an outsider within the civil rights organizations. Although she knew that sexist traditions limited her function as a top leader, she did not want to function in such an oppressive system. Therefore, Baker wanted to "transform the structural pillars of elitism within the Black Freedom Movement into something more democratic."[249]

After the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1957 Baker worked with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison and formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to create and organize a base for King. Baker became the executive director of SCLC, and thus she could put her idea of leadership into practice. However, the traditional African American ministers in SCLC believed in a top-down approach to organizing which conflicted with Baker's philosophy on leadership. Robnett argued, according to her socio-historical framework, that the role of women in the early years of SCLC caused tensions because they had to collaborate with male leaders whose conventional views on women were gender-biased.[250] Frustrated by the dominance of the ministers, Baker committed herself to the development of a student movement.

Soon after, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded as an organization based on Baker's leadership philosophy, namely group-centered leadership and collective decision-making. As the adult advisor until 1964, Baker encouraged SNCC to keep the movement democratic and to avoid struggles for personal leadership.[251] She guided the decision-making and urged the SNCC-members to develop community groups that would help to organize protests and campaigns. By modeling, teaching and writing about group-centered leadership, Baker guided students of SNCC to become community organizers in their own right. In the summer of 1960, Baker wrote that the new student movement "was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the "whole world" and the "Human Race."…The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but

[248] "Oral-History Interview Ella Baker, April 19, 1977" (Originally published by Southern Oral History Program in Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) <http://www.crmvet.org/nars/baker3.htm> Web.02-08-2015.
[249] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 371.
[250] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 98.
[251] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 68.

were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination. This inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than towards leader centered group pattern of organization, was refreshing."[252] Baker's ideas on leadership found a receptive audience, especially when students travelled all the way south to view at first hand how a student-led movement would end racial oppression.[253]

In conclusion, there is no overestimating Ella Baker's role in the Civil Rights Movement. Her behind-the-scenes leadership based on the belief that the potential to transform the world was through collective action, helped ordinary people to feel they could determine their own future. Her impact on political organizing is still evident today. A new generation of life long civil rights leaders such as, Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund Julian Bond, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Diane Nash, Bob Moses, and many other fellow student activists and young activists have all used grassroots organizing and local support to carry out their work.[254]

[252] Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 68.
[253] Ibidem, 68.
[254] Marian Wright Edelman, "Ella Baker: My Civil Rights Generation's 'Fundi'" (03-28-2014) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/ella-baker-my-civil-right_b_5052112.html> Web. 04-08-2015.

3.2. Fannie Lou Hamer: The Voice of Democracy

"I have been sick and tired for 46 years and my parents were tired before me and their parents were tired… Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."[255]

In a riveting testimony at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta City in 1964 broadcasted by television camera to the entire country, Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of Mississippi sharecroppers in Montgomery County, described what happened to southern blacks who attempted to register to vote.[256] At the convention, Hamer confronted the American society with its racism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred and hypocrisy.[257] Known for her tireless efforts to change the conditions of African Americans in Mississippi in particular, Hamer spoke, sang, and shared her life and vision of a better world. In the fifteen years she worked as a civil rights activist, Hamer emerged as one of the most compelling spokespersons in the Civil Rights Movement. What was her strength and how did she become the cultural carrier of the civil rights struggle?

3.2.1. Charismatic Female Leadership

Fannie Lou Hamer became involved in the Civil Rights Movement when she volunteered to attempt to register to vote in 1962.[258] By then she was already forty-five years old and a mother. She had lost her job and continually risked her life because of her civil rights activism. However, being arrested and beaten only solidified her determination, and she became a leader and inspiration to others. Hamer saw racial oppression as a consequence of a structurally flawed society.[259] Growing up in the oppressive sharecropper system in Mississippi, Hamer experienced exploitation at a very early age. Historian James Silver argues that "within this closed society that trailblazing women like Fannie Lou Hamer were born and struggled against multiple odds."[260] Watching her parents struggle, Hamer realized that something was wrong in Mississippi at a young age.[261] In an interview from 1965, Hamer talked about her decision to join the Civil Rights Movement.

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[255] Mamie E. Locke, "Is this America? Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party" in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 27.
[256] Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 287
[257] Locke, "Is this America?," 27.
[258] Ibidem, 27.
[259] Standley, "The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement," 191.
[260] Locke, "Is this America?," 28.
[261] Ibidem, 28.

"[…]when this Movement came to Mississippi I still feel it is one of the greatest things that ever happened because only a person living in the State of Mississippi knows what it is like to suffer; knows what it is like to be hungry; knows what it is like to have no clothing to wear. And these people in Mississippi state, they are not "down," all they need is a chance. And I am determined to give my part not for what the Movement can do for me, but what I can do for the Movement to bring about a change in the state of Mississippi. Actually, some of the things I experienced as a child still linger on; what the white man has done to the black people in the south!"[262]

Hamer's aim was black inclusion in the political process, and most importantly. She would settle for nothing less than liberation. Hamer helped form a new, avowedly interracial party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.[263] In 1964, the party challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation at the Democratic Convention in Atlanta City. With her speech "Is this America?" Hamer captivated the American people. She talked about she had suffered from beatings in a Winona jail and that this experience and all the other forms of violence against black activists made it hard to embrace America's democratic ideals. "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave… where we are threatened daily because we want to live a decent human life?"[264] Besides Hamer, African-American activist Anne Moody also expressed her hopelessness about society not willing to respond to the legitimate needs of its people. "I came to see through my writings that no matter how hard we in the Movement worked, nothing seemed to change; that we made a few visible little gains, yet at the root, things always remained the same…We were like an angry dog on a leash who had turned on its master. It could bark and howl and snap…but the master was always in control…And this trend of thinking is what finally brought about an end to my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement."[265] This disenchantment with American society and the Civil Rights Movement led some activists in the late sixties to embrace separatism and to plead for a self-sufficient black community.[266]

According to Robnett, women such as Hamer functioned as the bridge between organizations such as SNCC, CORE, the SCLC and the communities they tried to serve.[267]

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[262] "Oral History/Interview Life in Mississippi, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer & Jack O'Dell" in *Freedomways* (Spring, 1965) <http://www.crmvet.org/nars/flh1.htm> Web. 20-07-2015.
[263] Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 286.
[264] Peter Dreier, "I Question America" -- Remembering Fannie Lou Hamer's Famous Speech 50 Years Ago" in Huffington Post (26 August 2014)14-06-2015.
[265] Standley, "The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement," 191.
[266] Ibidem, 192.
[267] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 150.

Like Baker, she was a bridge leader and she believed in the power of grassroots activism. "[More interest will be generated] in politics at the grassroots level by the everyday kind of people who have lost their confidence in the democratic process because of corrupt politicians and their desire to perpetuate themselves in office while causing the masses to suffer."[268] She was considered as a powerful person in the local community. But, since she was not a minister, she was always in the pulpit.[269]

3.2.2. The Cultural Carrier

Though often described as a charismatic leader, Hamer never received her place as a primary leader within the Movement.[270] However, civil rights activist and attorney Eleanor Holmes Norton, who worked in Mississippi and heard many orators, argued that Hamer's skills were comparable to those of King.[271] Hamer was a powerful communicator and she often used songs to convey her message. Her singing talent was a source for public service. At mass meetings, she turned the audience into a rhetorical community by singing songs. [272] An observer in an audience noted:

"She was something to watch. Here was this badly educated, wonderful woman who was able to communicate at a most comfortable level with people who were infinitely more educated than she, more traveled than she…She was funny, and she was loving. She was a very endearing person…Everybody had that connection with her, and she obviously gave it back to you. She gave it to you and she got it right back. It was that kind of love connection that was her trademark."[273]

According to Bernice Johnson Reagon, the women within African American culture passed on the stories of life in song, in ceremonies, in games, and in the sounds around us. "Fannie Lou Hamer understood that what she experienced was not for her alone but for those who would be moved by the sound of her voice and the power of her living."[274] So she used African American church songs among African Americans to motivate and inspire them.

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[268] Eleanor Holmes Norton, "The Woman Who Changed the South: A Memory of Fannie Lou Hamer," in *MS* 6 (July 1977) 98.
[269] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 38.
[270] Ibidem, 195.
[271] Ibidem, 196.
[272] Janice D. Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement," in *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Special Issue: *The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (May, 1996) 573.
[273] Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit," 562.
[274] Reagon, "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement," 207.

Besides that Hamer was a good talker, organizer, and performer, she also was a good leader. She believed that leadership came from hard work and commitment. With her background as a sharecropper and as an uneducated woman, she was an unlikely leader. However, Hamer did not let her social background determine her role as a grassroots leader. "I may not have all the education but I do have common sense, and I know how to treat people."[275] Hamer had a good sense of how she was perceived by her community. She embodied a strong sense of character, intelligence, goodwill, and charisma, and these components made her the popular heroin of the Civil Rights Movement.

In conclusion, through her work for the MFDP and other grassroots efforts, Hamer helped America remove the barriers keeping African Americans on the sidelines of political involvement. She served as a model for social change to poor African Americans who felt excluded by the American society. She became the national voice, and as a cultural carrier she was able to inspire people. As an orator and song leader, Hamer was the transmitter of the civil rights struggle.

[275] Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit," 573.

3.3. Rosa Parks: The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement

"As time has gone by, people have made my place in the history of the Civil Rights Movement bigger and bigger. They call me the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement… interviewers still only want to talk about that one evening in 1955 when I refused to give up my seat on the bus. Organizations still want to give me awards for that one act more than thirty years ago… I understand that I am a symbol."[276]

Activist Rosa Parks became a symbol of the mass movement against racism when she broke the segregation law by refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Her arrest triggered civil rights action in the United States, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott that lasted 381 days. This event is generally seen as the beginning of a decade-long battle against segregation that mobilized millions and won the support of workers all over the world. Her action fundamentally changed America's view of the rights of black people and is considered as the start of years of successful nonviolent resistance to southern Jim Crow. Although she was not a political leader, strategist or thinker, Rosa Parks was an activist who played an important symbolic role in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. Why was her symbolic role so important and how did it influence the course of the civil rights struggle?

3.3.1. Community Empowerment

Parks was born as Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1913, and grew up in a world in which oppression of blacks was still a regular occurrence. Her family exposed her to a sense of black pride so that Parks was aware that "we were not free."[277] Discrimination against African Americans in public transportation was part of the system of segregation and second-class citizenship in Montgomery. Parks soon came to realize that black people were not considered complete human beings. Although they made up the vast majority of bus riders, black passengers were not allowed to sit in the first four rows of city buses. "When I learned that we, my family, were Negroes, it caused me to think that throughout my life I'd had to prove myself as something other than a beast."[278] After Parks was introduced to black

[276] Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013) 235.
[277] Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 4.
[278] Ibidem, 4.

history, she saw the history of black survival as "the ultimate weapon against white supremacy."[279]

Parks may be mostly praised for her disobedience on the bus in Montgomery, that incident does not do justice to her remarkable career as an organizer. She had been politically active before and after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She noted, "Before the bus incident I had been working with NAACP since 1943. And I worked with the…meetings for people to start becoming registered voters. Very few of us were registered in the early 1940's. And, it was practically impossible too for a black person regardless of the intelligence to become registered except for a very few selected by the white community."[280] Thus, in the 1930s, Parks joined the Montgomery Branch of the NAACP because she had grown frustrated with the contradictory character of American democracy. "I had always been taught that this was America, the land of the free and the home of the brave… I felt that it should be actual, in action rather than just something we hear and talk about."[281]

At the NAACP, Parks met Ella Baker who would become her mentor throughout her career. Around this time, Parks' political activism was increasing and since Montgomery's most prominent activists were men, Baker became her example. Both saw working with young people as a crucial factor for developing a new movement spirit.[282] Through grassroots organizing and community empowerment, Parks and Baker wanted to connect the black poor with the working class. However, Montgomery's NAACP was dominated by the black professional class and they made broad-based organizing nearly impossible.[283] To change this situation and to strengthen her community, Parks decided to go to the Highlander Folk School because she wanted to do something for her people.[284] According to Donna Langston, women's involvement in cultural programs and education has been pivotal because culture and education were politically effective. The HFS women developed social and cultural activities that nurtured community relations, such as community picnics, discussion groups, music lessons for children, and play productions.[285] Furthermore, the women also learned to shape programs "that fostered the formation of class and race identity and raised

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[279] Ibidem, 4.
[280] "Rosa Parks: Interview for Eyes on the Prize Documentary Montgomery Bus Boycott" (November 14, 1985) <http://www.crmvet.org/nars/parkseop.htm> Web. 23-07-2015.
[281] Ibidem, 17.
[282] Ibidem, 26.
[283] Ibidem, 26.
[284] Grace Jordan McFadden, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights," in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 90.
[285] Langston, "The Women of Highlander," 146, 147, 151.

consciousness."[286] Parks attended the workshop entitled "Racial Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision," which covered a wide-range of topics, including the use of nonviolent resistance to oppose segregation.[287] Four months after, Parks started the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

3.3.2. Respectable Middle Class Woman

Parks had not been planning to become the spokeswoman of the boycott. She explained that the act has been too often explained by her statement "that my feet were hurting and I didn't know why I refused to stand up when they told me. But the real reason of my not standing up was I felt that I had a right to be treated as any other passenger. We had endured that kind of treatment for too long."[288] Her decision was well considered and not motivated by physical exhaustion. But, it was not Parks alone who brought about change in Montgomery. In fact, four other women were arrested by the police before Parks, namely Aurelia Bowder, Susie McDonald, Claudette Colvin, and Mary Louise Smith.[289] Together with these four women who agreed to become plaintiffs and ended the laws applying to bus segregation, Parks' arrest is a prominent part of American history.

After her arrest, Parks' character and political experience established her reputation in the Montgomery community. Her working class income, and working class appearance represented a sympathetic class position that other Montgomerians hoped to emulate.[290] While she was not economically middle class or college educated, she had a character like a lady.[291] Moreover, since Parks represented the image of a respectable middle class woman, her arrest penetrated the passivity and the indifference of the black middle class of Montgomery. They realized that what happened to her could also happen to them. Therefore, Parks served as a catalyst. Mary Fair Burks argues that her "quiet determination, her belief in principles, her sense of justice and injustice, her certainty of right and wrong, her never failing dignity, her courage in the face of adversity…made her the inevitable catalyst."[292] However, Parks did not

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[286] Ibidem, 146.
[287] "Rosa Parks Notes School Desegregation Workshop Highlander Center," (July 24 - August 8, 1955) <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/5507park.htm> Web. 03-08-2015.
[288] "Rosa Parks, matriarch of civil rights, dies at 92: Catalyst of U.S. drive for racial equality lived in Detroit" (10-25-2005) <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9809237/print/1/displaymode/1098> Web. 03-08-2015.
[289] Barry Schwartz, "Collective Forgetting and the Symbolic Power of Oneness: The Strange Apotheosis of Rosa Parks," in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (June, 2009) 128.
[290] Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 72.
[291] Ibidem, 73.
[292] Mary Fair Burks, "Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, " in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (ed.), *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965* (Indiana University Press, 1990) 74.

like it when people focused on her to the exclusion of other people's contributions. She always insisted that, "Many people don't know the whole truth…I was just one of many who fought for freedom."[293]

It was this presence of dignity that commanded respect and attention from the Montgomery community and beyond. Long before her famous action on the bus, she lived up to her role as "the mother of the movement" in working to change things that were unjust for the sake of others. This determination to work for others became the catalyst for change throughout her life. Parks became a national symbol that eventually forced the dismantling of the system of official segregation in the American South.

Conclusion

Like most other African-American women activists, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks mobilized on the more accessible grassroots levels. As "bridge leaders," they were able to connect the community, students, and the church to Movement efforts in a seamless manner. Trailblazing women like Fannie Lou Hamer made lasting contributions to the African American and female experiences in the United States. Her forceful oratory and her personal courage were fixed in the American public memory. Ella Baker, the outspoken spirit of SNCC, proved to be an indispensable leader at every level. Like Baker, Rosa Parks cultivated youth leadership and promoted community leadership, and collaboration. Each of their contributions cultivated social, psychological, and cultural goals that were essential for the political and legislative goals presented in the master narrative. This knowledge influence the memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Namely, the emergence of bridge leadership undermined the hierarchical and centralized male-dominated leadership model. Gendered shifts broadened the spaces for women's participation. As Robnett notes, these dynamics contributed to unraveling the Civil Rights Movement from below.[294]

[293] Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 74.
[294] Robnett, *How Long? How Long,?* 258.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to determine in which ways the activism of civil rights activists Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hamer was representative of the avenues available for black female activism in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s -1960s. Furthermore, in what way does this alter the 'master narrative' of the Civil Rights Movement?

First it became clear that the master narrative was shaped by ideas of gender that created distorted ideas of the Civil Rights Movement. In the postwar period, America was obsessed with family life and traditional gender roles, and scholars have demonstrated that the Cold War contributed to that obsession by linking women's traditional roles with national security. Gendered hierarchy, and racial and class restrictions shaped the structures of the Civil Rights Movement and defined the nature of activist participation. Cultural expressions and historical accounts have adopted a one-sided perspective by focusing mostly on well-known and mostly male figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, Ralph Abernathy, and James Forman. Memorials narrow the story of the Movement down by emphasizing favorable events or perspectives. They have commodified the civil rights struggle into a narrative that does not fully grasp the complexity of the Movement, or the involvements of grassroots activists whose names have almost disappeared from the public memory.[295]

Similar to history books life writings, and memorials, the media showed the same tendency to focus on the traditional leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, in particular King who was crowned "Man of the Year." The mass media personalized news stories as a way of reducing the complexity of events and attracting a larger audience. This mass media representation of the Civil Rights Movement influenced the American public memory to a large extent. Furthermore, it caused historical neglect of the lesser-known activists, mainly grassroots and female activists.

Although playing crucial roles in the organization and mobilization of the black community, black women were hardly visible in the master narrative. They were embedded within a structural context of three interlocking systems of oppression, namely racism, sexism, and classism that influenced the roles that were assigned to them in the Movement. These three forms of oppression pushed women behind the scenes while men stood in the spotlight, and delegated them to play roles in areas of organizing, mediating conflicts and coordinating activities. The attitudes of male leaders held towards black women were a

[295] Letort, "The Rosa Parks Story," 31.

manifestation of the larger problem of sexism and patriarchy within the black church, culture, and organizations like The Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Despite these hardships, women operated individually and collectively to empower their position. Published accounts of black women activists suggest that the Movement gave women a sense of empowerment. Bernice Reagon, who joined the Civil Rights Movement in her hometown Albany, said that the battle for equal rights gave her confidence to combat all forms of oppression. "There was a sense of power, in a place where you didn't feel you had any power. There was a sense of confronting things that terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the street… So you were saying in some basic way, 'I'll never again stay inside these boundaries.'…I had grown up in a society where there were very clear lines. The older I got, the more I found what those lines were… The Civil Rights Movement gave me the power to challenge *any* line that limits me."[296] Thus, Bernice Reagon argued that being part of the Movement helped women to stand strong in their fight for racial equality.

Furthermore, black women's contributions were vital for the existence of the Civil Rights Movement. As Robnett showed in her social movement theory, African American women being day-to-day organizers were as essential for the success of protest actions as charismatic male leaders. In their role as leaders, African American women were concerned with helping people in their communities, shaping their goals, and encouraging them to become self-empowered. They did what they had to do to make things better in their communities. With this in mind, one can understand why black women did not see themselves as the typical leader. Moreover, as Robnett argues, female participants could not be conventionalized in a dichotomous fashion as simply leaders or followers.[297] Each of their contributions cultivated social, psychological, and cultural goals that were essential for the political and legislative goals presented in the master narrative. This knowledge influences the memory of the Civil Rights Movement, namely, the emergence of bridge leadership undermined the hierarchical and centralized male-dominated leadership model. Gendered shifts stimulated women's participation. As bridge leaders, women like Baker, Hamer, and Parks were the vital link between the recognized male leaders and the community. So, their activism was representative of the avenues available for black female activism because they all spread their influence from behind the scenes.

[296] Peter B. Levy, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998) 116.
[297] Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement," 1687.

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