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When a movement becomes gendered: women of the Civil Rights Movement.

Life and Actions of Septima Clark and Ella Baker

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*Education is the key to unlock
the golden door of freedom*
-George Washington Carver-

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Abbreviations

ACMHR	Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
ANC	African National Congress
CEP	Citizenship Education Program
COFO	Council of Federated Organization
FSA	Federation of South- African Women
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NTA	National Teacher's Examination
PSTA	Palmetto State Teachers' Association
PTAs	Parents- teachers associations
SAIC	South-African Indian Congress
SCFCW	South Carolina Federation of Colored Women
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
UCMI	United Christian Movement Inc.
WPC	Women Political Council
WPA	War Production Areas

Introduction

The aim of my thesis, entitled *When a movement becomes gendered: women of the Civil Rights Movement. Life and Actions of Septima Clark and Ella Baker*, is to give a voice back to all the underrated women of the Civil Rights Movement, focusing my attention on two of its bigger educators, Septima Clark and Ella Baker.

As far as I can remember I have always been interested in the Civil Rights Movement for the simple fact that I couldn't understand (and still can't) why a nation, which considers itself as the bulk, or better the only "real" democracy in the entire world continued to apply such undemocratic, racist, and inhuman segregationist laws without any respect for human rights.

When I was thinking about a possible thesis regarding this historical and social period I thought that a lot had already been written about, until when women came to my mind. Were they active members of the major Civil Rights Organizations? Did they took part to the most important achievements of the Movement? And if yes, what happened to them? What about their side of the story?

While searching I founded out that when we think about the Civil Rights Movement names and faces such as those of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X jump on our minds, they represent the men of great speeches and of traumatic killings, but behind them there were thousands of women working, connecting the core with the periphery, the male leader with grassroots. Women taught to rural and urban black communities how to read and write, so that they can register for voting, informed black citizens about their rights, and women pushed toward a democratization of the movement. The majority of women didn't approve the top-down model of participation male leaders were imposing on people. On the contrary they envisaged a movement in which the pushes against the segregationist system came from ordinary people, following a bottom-up approach.

Stressing from these affirmations I wanted to bring back to life the hard work, the responsibilities and the pain of the losses women had to endure, while fighting for the hope of a better future.

Unfortunately I discovered that history had forgotten to mention women's participation to the activities of the Civil Rights Movement, and they had fallen into the oblivion up until the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s. There are no public recorded speeches of these women, the only sound recordings we have left are recreational and for the majority ruined by the passing of the time.

Due to the lack of Italian information on this theme I used American works of which some of the most important to the goals of my thesis were: *Freedom's teacher: the life of Septima Clark* by Katherine Mellen Charron, *Echo in my soul* by Septima Clark, *A woman's Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising* by Courtney, Lockeretz, *Women of the Civil Rights Movement: trailblazers and torchbearers, 1941-1965* by Crawford, Rouse, and Woods, *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* by Houch and Dixon, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* by Ling and Monteith, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* by Barbara Ransby, *How Long? How Long? : African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights: African American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights* by Belinda Robnett, and *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* by Moye.

When I started writing I decided to divide my work in two parts each of one them containing two chapters. In the first part I focus my attention on the general socio-cultural American white and black backgrounds, while in the second part I tried to transport the contents of the first part into the life and actions of Septima Clark and Ella Baker. More purposely:

Chapter one, *Women in a gendered American society*, briefly analyzes the roles of women in the 1950s American society. Back in those days women were conceived as fragile, irrational human beings incapable of taking any decision. For this reasons it was common opinion that good, decent women had to leave their work when they got married, in order to stay at home taking care of the

household and of her children. Those beliefs, were transmitted to the Black community, and Chapter two, *Women and Leadership*, underlines how white gendered customs influenced black culture. Blacks' willingness to be accepted by the white racist dominant society affected African- American style like the clothing they wore or the straight hairstyle they showed off, but they also assumed the same societal characteristics, and black women were the first to pay the price, with the only difference that while they lived in slums, their white counterpart spent their existences in a nice suburb. Black women's duties outside their homes were related to the Baptist Church where they were tasked with the collecting of fundraisings.

This differentiation between the male and the female sex caused women's exclusion for any recognized leadership position in any of the organization of the Civil Rights Movement, producing false historical facts: Martin Luther King Jr. rose to fame during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and in someone's mind he was the Boycott. In reality things were very different as the protest was started by Rosa Parks, when she refused to stand up from her seat in a public bus, and gave it to a white man. Rosa Parks was part of a women's organization headed by Jo Ann Robinson. The group of women had been talking about a protest for a long time, so when Parks' action started they organized the movement, spreading the voice.

In such gendered society which was deeply affected by both the white society and the sexist Baptist Church, women were never considered leaders.

In Chapters three and four, respectively entitled *Septima Poinsette Clark* and *Ella Josephine Baker*, I will focus on the life and actions of two of the greater educators the Civil Rights Movement had.

Septima Poinsette Clark focused her attention in adult education. She first realized that such kind of education was important while educating young students in Johns Island public school. Those students parents believed in her and in her job to the point that they asked her to help them with everyday actions (such situation was common to all the teachers working in African- American rural public schools) like writing and reading letters and counts. There she understood that those people were not actual citizens, they lived in some sort of a

limbo. This situation prevented them to participate to the public and civil life of the community in which they lived. Stressing from this knowledge she attended and then worked for the Highlander Folk School which brought to life the Citizenship School that in few years spread in almost the entire Southern States. These schools prepared black people to register to vote, which was something that the white racist society didn't want to. Finally the project had to be shut down due to the white's continuous attacks, and was transferred to the SCLC under the name of Citizenship Education Program (CEP) which became the most important and effective crusade King's organization had ever accomplished.

As far as Ella Baker was concerned she completely rejected to be a teacher like Clark was, or at least in the classical definition of the term. She did whatever she could to erase gender differentiations within the main Civil Rights Organizations in which she worked from the NAACP, the SCLC and the SNCC which she projected and influenced. She thought that the male Organization would have ended up ruining the entire project of the Civil Rights Movement because black Baptist leaders, King included, were following a top- down approach which didn't allowed people to speak their minds. On the contrary, she imagined a Movement following a bottom-up approach in which the democratic base was larger because leaders would have become dependent from people's will.

PART ONE

Chapter 1: Women in a gendered American society

1.1 A gendered American society

When thinking about the United States of America our induced imagination projects us into a perfect country where justice, human rights, and democracy are equal for every human being. Its citizens are good, decent people who believe in the power of God and family, into their country and its institutions. They cherish for other's lives and people rights to the point they are willing to engage wars in order to export their definition of democracy.

It's the place (country) in which a carpenter thanks to the helpful hand of some unknown, unselfish good- hearted rich man and a little bit of hard work manages to achieve its American- dream by becoming one of the richest man in the entire country. It's a sort of "Wonderland", "a garden of Eden" of which the majority of people, in almost every western country, wants to be part of.

Sadly, as dreams do not last forever even this utopian vision of the American society must come to an end.

The American society has the same problems of every other society. It's shaken by corruption, concussion, racism, bigotry, individualism, and fear of the different/ stranger, just to quote some. What is relevant to the aim of my thesis is the fact that the American society is also a gendered society. Women had to fight, as in any other country, to achieve their rights.

This statement might be verified by underlining three important dates that very well represent the achievements for which women had been fighting in the first half of the 20th century:

1. Up until 1920 American women weren't allowed to vote. The main reason behind this situation is to be found on male prejudices towards the female sex. Back in those times women were said to be not as rational and intelligent as men and as a consequence of this situation, added to their lack of autonomy caused by their childish emotions, it was common opinion that their vote would have been, without any doubt, influenced or

decided by their fathers, husbands and brothers. After a long battle engaged by the suffragettes on August 18th, 1920 the Congress extended the right to vote to women by ratifying the XIX amendment which states: « The right of citizen of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. [...]»¹;

2. Until 1930 American women couldn't have their own passport, they could only use those of their husband;
3. The other issue, which helps defining the American society as gendered is women's work. Women usually worked as secretaries, teachers and assistants, which were the only jobs decent women were allowed to do, until they got married. For the culture of the time be a mother and a wife was incompatible with having a job. It was common belief that a woman wouldn't be able to take care of such three different things. In few words being a worker meant to be a bad mother and wife. In 1950, for example, only 10% of women with children under the age of six worked while 90% stayed at home to take care of their children and their household. It was only in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act² that any discrimination against women regarding their pay, promotion and jobs were declared illegal: « It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin»³.

When talking about gender our mind might think about the biological differences between sexes, but it would be wrong. Gender is not about someone's sex, it refers to a set of norms which differ whether they are oriented towards a male or a

¹ <http://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-xix>.

² The Civil Rights Acts (1964) marked the ending of segregation and restricted job discrimination based on someone's sex, color, religion, race and ethnicity. It was first suggested by the Kennedy administration and was later signed by President Johnson, even though there were tough resistances within the Congress' southern members.

³ <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/sac/oh0300/ch1.htm>.

female subject, and are evidently connected to the historical and cultural period⁴ in which they are applied.

Stressing from this definition we might all agree that everything related to gender is a creation of human societies, gender do not exists in nature.

When a baby is born they are appointed to one of these two categories, and are educated in order to prepare themselves for the role they are expected to occupy in their adult life. Since tender age⁵ children are taught by family, mass media, peer groups, schools, and other agents (for example religions) that there are different societal expectations based on their sex⁶.

Families, for instance, have been considered the places where this process begins: while parents often supply girls with dolls, role play and some miniature functioning objects for the care of the house (like ovens, brooms and vacuum cleaner); they buy boys superheroes dolls, trucks, automobiles, toy guns and solitary play.

Over the centuries these “traditions” together with other agents’ actions have induced people, especially male individuals, into the wrongful belief that their actions are connected to their nature and are not socially constructed. Following this path, in a gender differentiated society, women are expected to take care of the household and to maintain a specific behaving: they should be carrying, nurturing, passive, and friendly; when they do not act as the society dictates they are considered aggressive and most of the time are disliked (even by people of their own sex). In a completely different way men should appear strong and unfriendly that’s why when showing some female characteristics they are, most of the times, victims of violence and harassment by other men. Those convictions find their basis on the concept of sexism which puts the male sex into a higher position than the female one.

⁴ For example, until the beginning of the 20th century, pink was associated with boys while blue with girls. Today it’s the exact opposite.

⁵ It is thought that already at four/five years of age children are already well aware of gender differences.

⁶ Psychological or physical differences between male and female.

Stressing from this definition of gender the American society is evidently gendered as it found its basis on traditional families⁷ which are the first places in which children learn what they are or are not expected to do, on the base of their sex. The traditional American family finds its routes in the 18th industrial revolution.

According to many historians before this period of technological improvement the role of each member within an average American family was equally important: if men had to work the fields and repair tools they were in need of; women had to prepare food and clothing and work the fields too. Both parents were charged with the education of their children⁸. Even though women were given only formal rights, both female and male labor was necessary for the survival of both the family and the farm.

With the advent of the industrial revolution and the consequent reduction of the subsistence economy⁹, people left their farms and went working and living in growing cities. In this new context the role of the members of the family changed: women's work was not life-saving anymore. Families were able to buy the goods, which were previously produced by women (working in the farms), they needed from cloths to fresh or preserved food¹⁰. In this new environment women didn't worked but stayed at home taking care of both their children¹¹ and household. Their work became less valuable as they could buy all the products that once they used to produce; while men became referred as "breadwinners".

Historians argue that this new situation helped the development of the concept of gender within the American society: while men were perceived as strong, smart, competitive and rational human beings whose only duty was to work in order to gain a wage; women became some sort of a mythological creature characterized by a gentle and loving behavior which made them irrational, self- sacrificing,

⁷ Even though, today, we cannot take into consideration only "traditional families" as different types are recorded.

⁸ Families had more than two children as they were helpful for the maintenance of both farms and households.

⁹ Subsistence economy: the typical economy of the pre-industrial revolution's period. It is characterized by the use of basic goods which are provided towards hunting and subsistence agriculture.

¹⁰ Development of the so called market economy.

¹¹ Couples had fewer children than before as they became a sort of a burden since families had to buy food in order to survive.

emotional and soft, all traits that made them perfect for the task of growing and educate children. In the light of this newly constructed image, women became not suited for work outside their homes, and to have full citizen rights: they couldn't vote or being elected.

This new division of responsibilities within each member of the family is at the basis of the creation of the so called American traditional family which is composed by a working husband, a work-in wife, and their children.

This prototype of such perfect family became almost essential during the 1950s when right after the Second World War it became momentous to help veterans overcome the atrocity of the war.

1.2 American women during the Second World War

In her 1971 article entitled *The Women Liberation Movement: its origins, structures and ideas*, Jo Freeman¹² argues that:

Sometime in the nineteen twenties, feminism died in the United States. It was a premature death. Feminists had only recently obtained their long sought for tool, the vote, with which they had hoped to make an equal place for women in this society. But it seemed like a final one. By the time the granddaughters of the women who had sacrificed so much for suffrage had grown to maturity, not only had social mythology firmly ensconced women in to their home, but the very term "feminist" had become an epithet. [...].¹³

If we do not take into consideration the Second World War period and even the gendered 1950s we might agree with her.

While being one of the most terrible conflicts in the entire human history, World War II was for American women not only a period of huge sacrifice but also a time for female empowerment.

¹²http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01013/.

¹³ Jo Freeman, *The women's liberation movement: its origins, structures and ideas*, 1971, p. 1; http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01013/; <http://www.jofreeman.com/feminism/liberationmov.htm>; www.d.umn.edu/.../2111/womlibfreeman.htm.

Just few years before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor almost 80% of American citizens (women included) thought that a married woman shouldn't work outside her house if her husband was already working; schools didn't hire married women, and what might even be worse, they used to fire those employed when they got married while under contract. The Federal government, certainly, didn't help the cause specifically when the Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins¹⁴ accused married women workers of being "pin money"¹⁵ girls by publicly stating they should have been ashamed of themselves for being such a dangerous threat for the entire American society.

With the entrance of the United States¹⁶ in the conflict women, suddenly, became a sort of a "secret weapon" for both the American industry and military sectors.

When the United States entered World War II the majority of the work force, predominantly composed by male individuals, was sent to fight in Europe while a lot of factories were converted into war production plants. New workers were needed so the Roosevelt administration decided to call on women who kept the country's production running by occupying traditionally male jobs. Between 1940 and 1945 female workforce increased (in the United States) from 27% to nearly 37%.

Women were deployed both in the private and in the public sectors. When working in the private sector women were mostly employed in production plants that had been converted into war industries. They produced all, or at least the majority, of the armaments, from guns to helicopters, that were used in the front by their men. What is relevant is that, in this period, women did jobs that the majority of men never did for example: men working in the district of Detroit produced cars while women in war time, in those very same factories, made weapons which production, in the pre-war period, would not be possible for a sweet, gentle, loving and irrational soul.

It is interesting to notice how citizens dramatically changed their minds on women workers: by the end of 1942, 60% of the male population thought their wives

¹⁴ Frances Perkins: born Fannie Coraline Perkins (1880-1965), from 1933 to 1945 served as U.S. Secretary of Labor during the Presidencies of F.D. Roosevelt and H. S. Truman.

¹⁵ In colloquial English it refers to the money spent for the purchase unnecessary goods.

¹⁶ December 8th, 1941.

should exit the house and go to work for the war industries, while 71% was convinced that even married women needed to participate to the war effort. Those inversions in common beliefs are to be reflected in the dramatic increase of women workers in two of the biggest industrial cities of the New World: in San Francisco working women went from 138.000 to 276.000 while in Detroit from 182.000 of the early 1941 they grew up to 387.000.

Some 900.000 women were hired by the Federal Government. Even though the majority of them were employed in clerical work some 400.000 served as auxiliary military forces¹⁷. These female forces were divided into three corps: nurses, which was the most appreciated one both by the military and the public opinion because they reflected the characteristics (sweet, gentle, and caring) that the American society had imposed on women; aviators, which were the less accepted by the military and even though they were flying with military aircrafts they were still considered civilians; and, finally, the armed servers who were allowed to serve after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In 1942 women were able to be part of the US Navy, Army and Coast Guard, and by 1943 of the Marines (even though only for six months). Of all those women who served in the auxiliary forces, some 88 were imprisoned by the enemies while others 432 lost their lives. It's interesting to underline the fact that before the War the majority of women workers belonged to lower social classes and were usually very young and unmarried. With the advent of the conflict a change in tendency was palpable as a lot of married middle aged women from the higher classes started to work.

If women were working while men were fighting in Europe, with whom were the children with?

As recalled by Freeman:

[...] The sudden onslaught of the war radically changed the whole structure of social relationships as well as the economy. Men were drafted into the army and women into the labor force. Now desperately needed, women's wants were provided for as were those of the boys on the front. Federal financing of day care

¹⁷ Being in a combat's first line was a male duty, but given the gravity of the war, military strategists accepted the role of women as support but only for a limited period of time: when the war ended they would have not been needed anymore.

centers in the form of the Lanham Act¹⁸ passed Congress in a record two weeks. Special crash training programs were provided for the new women workers to give them skills they were not previously thought capable of exercising. Women instantly assumed positions of authority and responsibility unavailable only the year before [...].¹⁹

Starting from July 1942 the Lanham Act was conceived by administrative decree to help families with child, and more specifically women. In the same year the Congress authorized the investment of \$6 million for the creation of child care facilities in order to help mothers who were working in the war production areas (WPA). The development of such child care facilities became a matter of both local and federal agencies, whose only effort was engaged for winning the war and increase the production. They didn't care about working mothers and their children or about the latter's education. Even though women were asking for the maintenance of such facilities, when the War ended they were shut down and women were sent back home as the role of women, once their men went back, was to take care of their children and households.

More generally, the conditions of women within the United States came back to the pre-war situation:

[...] But what happened when the war ended? Both men and women had heeded their country's call to duty to bring it to a successful conclusion. Yet men were rewarded for their efforts and women punished for theirs. The returning soldiers were given the G.I. Bill²⁰ and other veteran benefits, as well as their jobs back and a disproportionate share of the new ones created by the war economy. Women, on the other hand, saw their childcare centers dismantled and their training programs ceased. They were fired or demoted in droves and often found it difficult to enter colleges flooded with ex- G.I. matriculating on government

¹⁸ The Lanham Act was passed by the Congress on 1940. Its original function was to authorize loans or grants at Federal level in order to support public works.

¹⁹ Freeman, J., *The women's liberation movement: its origins, structures and ideas*, 1971, p. 9. http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01013/.

²⁰ The G.I. Bill was a law signed by President Roosevelt in 1944. The aim of this law was to give some benefits to World War II veterans. It included: low interest loans, low- costs mortgages, one year of unemployment compensation and the payment of school's tuition (both high school and university).

money. Is it any wonder that they heard the message that their place was in the home? Where else could they go. ? [...]»²¹

1.3 American women in the 1950s

Even though they expected a total different result as they largely proved they had the same capabilities as men, at the end of the War women went back to their previous occupations of loving mothers and wives with the only task to educate their children and keep the house clean. Obviously the close- minded American society wasn't ready to detach itself from its traditional vision of womanhood. Moreover, people thought that heroes coming back home needed, in order to avoid more unnecessary traumas, to start feeling safe again in their pre-war social structure.

In poor words: it was thought that people, but mostly veterans, needed to go back to the lives they had before the atrocities of the war, and as the entire American social organization was based on gender differentiation women should go back to their houses.

Unfortunately things didn't went back the way they were, but they got even worse to the point that in this advanced society the sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), in 1955, theorized a gendered model of the family in which total segregation was its defying feature. If men were supposed to be high educated skilled workers; women had to educate children, clean the house and "take care" of their husband. Within the family the men had to take decisions.

This vision of society was strengthened by both Government and mass media campaigns as Meyerowitz writes in her 1994 *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America*: «[...] Studies of postwar culture found that government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning veterans [...]»²².

²¹ Freeman, J., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²² Mayerowitz, J. "*Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America*", Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

The causes of this worsening women's situation didn't only lie in the end of the Second World War but also in the insurgence of the so called Cold War which, with its nuclear treats, was scaring the entire American population.

What clearly happened is that the American society managed to create a mythological image of its women who were represented: as lovely and gentle souls always in perfect shape with beautiful hair, dresses, and make up, baking or cooking in an all-equipped kitchen while the children (usually two: one boy and one girl) were playing in the garden, obviously waiting for their father.

Betty Friedan in her 1963 book entitled *The Feminine Mystique*²³ describes how women used to spend their day:

Ye Gods, what do I do with my time? Well, I get up at six. I get my son dressed and then give him breakfast. After that I wash dishes and bathe and feed the baby. Then I get lunch and while the children nap, I sew or mend or iron and do all the other things I can't get done before noon. Then I cook supper for the family and my husband watches TV while I do the dishes. After I get the children to bed, I set my hair and then I go to bed²⁴.

Medias and magazines were the maximum perpetrators of such unfortunate women condition. As argued by Friedan, on her study *The Feminine Mystique*, magazines were constantly reinforcing the common definition of the ideal woman, as they were dramatically influenced by the American society which was turning more gendered than ever. In this period more than 90% of the advertisements were showing women in their houses while doing some house work, taking care of the children, or honoring their husband. From the pictures below the differences in advertisement's women representation during the war and peace period is astonishing:

²³ The concept of "Feminine Mistique" is used by Betty Friedan to explain the differences between the roles of men and women within the model of the American society.

²⁴ Friedan, B., "*The Feminine Mistique*", New York: Norton, 1963.



Figure 1: gendered 1950s

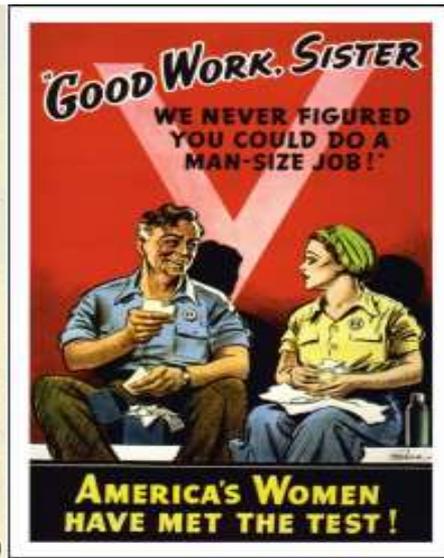


Figure 2: Women contribution in industries

As we can see in the mid-40s women were represented as equal to men, in figure 2 a man and a woman are represented while eating their lunch together during the lunch-break while wearing almost the same clothing; in figure 1 the situation is completely different: a very submissive woman who's taking to her husband his breakfast. In this picture even the way in which the woman is represented (on her knees) describes perfectly where the American culture of the time positioned women.

Women's constructed irrationality was also reflected in the majority of the advertising image of the time as they were always portrayed while buying foods, cleaning aids, cosmetics and clothing with a male figure besides them, as they were in need of a manly, wise and rational supervision.

Stressing from the 1950s advertisement's pictures, Courtney and Lockeretz²⁵ in their 1967 research-book entitled *A Woman's Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising* were able to find four women's stereotypes:

1. Women must stay at home and take care of their family and are considered good women if they use a lot of cleaning products for the house ;

²⁵ Courtney, Lockeretz. "A woman's Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising", New York, Norton, 1967.

2. Women are not able to take important decisions (for example buy a washing machine);
3. Women were constantly needed to be protected by men;
4. Women were considered as sexual objects.

All these characteristics didn't match the real (not constructed) behavior of the female sex: which means that in reality ladies didn't spend their entire day cooking, cleaning, ironing and taking care of their children. In reality after bringing their children to school and spending their morning in cleaning the house they didn't have much to do so they would meet in their houses. These very groups of women, which without any doubt discussed about their position in such a gendered society, are sometimes connected to the rise of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Chapter 2: Women and leadership

2.1. Women's resistance in the Abolitionist Era

In this thesis I will focus my attention on the role of women in the Civil Rights Movement. Before entering the main topic, I think that a brief mention on the works of the African- American women who fought for the abolitionists cause is needed. The actions they made, the discriminations and the dangers they faced are the same of those that women of the Civil Rights Movement had to endure.

White women such as Elisabeth Heyrick, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Abbey Kelley, Elisabeth Margaret Chandler, Lydia Maria Child and Maria Weston Chapman were between the most fierce and dedicated abolitionists. These women worked in direct contact with their African- American colleagues, but there were differences within them: if whites were of educated, middle and upper class descendants, blacks were of uneducated and poor background.

The majority of black women was illiterate, and worked for the entire day. This situation prevented them from participate to the activities promoted by the abolitionists, but in spite of their difficult situations some of them did everything they could, and put their lives in danger to help fugitive slaves in their quest for reaching northern states and in their search for finding a job.

As stated by Ellen Ginzburg Migliorino²⁶, two of the most remembered of those abolitionists are Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

Sojourner Truth²⁷ was born enslaved around 1797 in Ulster County, New York and became a free woman when slavery was abolished in 1827. Truth was born as Isabella Baumfree, but changed her name in 1843 after she had a religious vision while working as a domestic. From that moment on she decided she would have dedicated her life to the abolitionist cause. She started traveling with other white abolitionists in order to move people consciousness, to make the American society understand that slavery was its biggest sin. As a former slave she was able to list

²⁶ Migliorino Ginzburg, E., *“Donne contro la schiavitù. Le abolizioniste americane prima della Guerra Civile”* Piero Lacaita Editore, Manduria, 2002; Ginzburg Migliorino, E., *“La marcia immobile. Storia dei neri americani dal 1770 al 1970”*, Selene Edizioni, Milano, 1994.

²⁷ Mabee, C., *“Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend”*, NYU Press, 1993, Kindle Edition.

all the violences and brutalities she suffered twice because she was a woman (she had thirteen between sons and daughters who were illegally sold to other masters, she managed to keep her youngest daughter, Sophia).

White abolitionists used to encourage ex-slaves to talk their life's experiences to the audience because first person narrative speeches had the ability to be more powerful and moving. They were more influential, because the crowd was able to see with their own eyes the man or the woman who had suffered for those conditions, they were the incarnation of the reality and for that reason they were more believable than the accounts made by the whites.

Even though Truth never learned to read and write, she was quite an orator, as she had the ability to charm and move the listeners with her speeches.

In her life as a free woman she fought in favor of women and blacks' rights. When the feminist movement was created in Seneca Falls, on July 1848, she spoke to the *Woman's Convention* in Worcester where a resolution, which declared that the enslaved woman was the most abused, was approved.

One of her most important speeches is the one she gave during the *Women's Rights Convention* in Akron, Ohio, which took place from the 28th to the 29th of May, 1851. The address, entitled "*Ain't I a woman?*" argued that colored women were the most exploited, while white women weren't exactly as free as it was commonly thought, because they were subjugated by whites' traditional gendered society:

[...] That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? [...].²⁸

²⁸ <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/sojour.htm>.

Harriet Tubman²⁹ was herself an illiterate ex-slave who actively participated to the abolitionist cause. If Truth was more fond of speaking in public, she rather stayed behind the scene and helping escaping slaves to reach the north.

Tubman was born in Dorchester County, Maryland, in 1821. She was daughter to Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, who were both slaves, and had other ten siblings.

When she was fifteen she was hit by a one kilogram object, with which the plantation attendant wanted to harm another slave. The blow almost cost her life and left her with a deep scar and episodes of narcolepsy. According to Migliorino³⁰ this event is to be considered the catalyzer of her future actions. Finally, in 1849, together with two of its brothers, Robert and Ben, she escaped.

Eventually she decided that she would have saved her entire family, and she did it. After leading her sister and her family up north, with the help of her sister's husband (who himself was escaped from the plantation and was trying to save his family), she escorted most of her family through Maryland and Delaware to Pennsylvania.

In the following ten years she managed to help a lot of people between friends, family and other slaves to reach the "free land". Finally, in 1857 she managed to save her parents too.

It is estimated that she saved from Maryland and guided north some three hundred slaves. For this reason she is often referred as "Moses of its people".

2.2. Being Black in a Southern white society

The White gendered American culture was ultimately assimilated by the Black community as African- American we're trying to end segregation. By the 1950s American principles of respectability, gender role differentiation, family, education and beauty became sustained by the majority of the Black community.

African- American citizens followed the gender division of the society. Black men were charged with the survival of the house and they had to: work, be dressed

²⁹ Clinton, C., "*Harriet Tubman: the road to freedom*", Little, Brown & Co., 2004, Kindle Edition.

³⁰ Migliorino Ginzburg, E., *op. cit.*

with fine clothes and have the most respectable behaviors in order to contrast white's insinuation which depicted them as sexual assailants, child abusers, kidnapers, thieves and killers. Silently, they had to endure to all white's defamations in order to protect their families and have their lives spared.

If men were suffering such situation, things were even worse for colored women. They were facing a double discrimination: been a woman and black. African-American women had always been considered by American society less than human, and this envision facilitated the flourish of rapes and murders toward them on the account of the white male population.

Black women's work force had historically been more active than the White's one, but starting from the 1900 it became appropriate to married Black women to leave their jobs and take care of the household, of their husband and of their children. They basically should respect the standard of the *Feminine Mystique*³¹ with the only difference that they didn't lived in a nice middle-class suburb but in slums, their children could not attend good schools because they were born into the southern segregated society where they could not attend the same schools as their fellow whites. Anyway colored women tried hard to be as perfect, well mannered, educated and kind as they could no matter how hard the white population tried to broke this equilibrium.

Black press helped the spread of such male authority: for example journalists such as Frida De Knight who wrote for one of the best-selling magazine within the African-American community, *Ebony*, argued that not only a good woman should take care of the house and of her children but also should be able to please her man sexually and ease their psychological pain for been continually turned impotent by the segregationist system.

In an article appeared in the *Chicago Defender's* it was suggested that women should be perfectly dressed at breakfast so that their man would leave for work «[...] with an indelible memory of fresh, rose-like, dew-kissed loveliness[...]»³² which would have helped him through the day and reinforce their marriage in order to

³¹ Friedan, B., *op. cit.*

³² Ling, P. J., Monteith S. (2013), *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, Routledge, New York, Kindle Edition. Pg.75.

avoid that «[...] through her sloppy appearance and unsanitary attention, she can drive him to the liquor bars, the arms of another woman [...] or at court for a divorce.»³³

The *Arkansas State Press* stated that «[...] with the coming of the summer we must all work even more faithfully to keep lovely to look at [...]»³⁴.

What is worse here is that this very same magazine was run by Daisy Bates and her husband L.C. Bates two of the main NAACP activists who fought for Black's freedom in Little Rock.

Other magazine such as *Tan* stated that « Marriage is a full time occupation that has to be worked at to be successful [...]. Usually it's a wife own stupidity that deals her to the short end of what might have been a lasting, happy marriage. »³⁵

Women were charged with the survival of: their marriage, their children and of their household.

Such social division has without any doubt favored the absence of women as formal leaders within the movement, a position that was usually covered by some Baptist Preacher, but, at the same time, it likely favored Black women to influence their local communities as the role they occupied within the society made them more trustworthy than big leaders.

According to Robnett³⁶, African- American women became *bridge leaders*.

If we put this ideology into the Civil Rights Movement it's easy to understand why activists usually appeared as fine and educated people: what's the best way to end oppression, segregation and racism of White citizens? Show them that all their believes about Black's race are wrong, that they are good, decent Americans like anybody else. They have the same style, education, religious believes and ideals. Activists were convinced that by emulating White's behavior they would have been more willing to accept Blacks as an integrant and equal part of the society. That's exactly what happened: a lot of undecided Whites (they weren't segregationist but not even pro- equal rights) turned into non- segregationists, and in some cases even activists.

³³ *Ivi.*

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ Robnett, B., *African- American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization*, in «American Journal of Sociology», Volume 101, Issue 6 (May 1996), 1661-1693.

Such Black's behavior is testified by one of the most iconic pictures of the Civil Rights Movement, the one portraying a well- mannered Elizabeth Eckford while walking the street in order to arrive at her first day of school in a desegregated High School while being escorted by a white women crowd characterized by the absence of a very female, superior and well- mannered attitude.



Figure 3: Elisabeth Eckford surrounded by a crowd of white women in Little Rock, 1957.

2.3. A gendered Civil Rights Movement

The image of the ideal woman, typical of the 1950s' American society, was reflected in the Civil Rights Movement in which women's essential roles were forgotten until the rise of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though feminists managed to fill this historical misperception, still in these days, when thinking about the Movement the majority of people think about some male important leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X.

The reason for this lack of consciousness might be related to the history's selective memory that is to say to the ability to remember some facts in a very clear and specific way while completely forgetting others. In this case while men are well remembered, women are mostly forgotten. This lack in such a particular type of memory needs to be created as it's made up by those who write about a specific historical period. In the case of female Black activists' erase from history, historians of the time were influenced by two linked social construction: the American gendered white dominated culture- which relegated female in the households; and the Baptist's church tradition- which saw men as leaders and women as helpers. Putting it in a more understandable way, women were ultimately excluded from the early history of the Civil Rights Movement because it was a gendered crusade: the structures of the organizations, the mobilization of resources, and more in general the entire experience of Black female activists was influenced by the hierarchical American construction of society which explains why women were supposed to occupy only domestic and subordinate positions.

There seem to be many parallels that can be drawn between treatment of Negroes and treatment of women in our society as a whole. But in particular, women we've talked to who work in the movement seem to be caught up in a common-law caste system that operates, sometimes subtly, forcing them to work around or outside hierarchical structures of power which may exclude them. Women seem to be placed in the same position of assumed subordination in personal situations too. It is a caste system which, at its worst, uses and exploits women³⁷.

In addition to this gendered related reason (for the lack of female leaders) there is also a difference of perspectives: if Black men wanted to achieve racial equality to obtain the same rights white men had, colored women desired to fight also for the equality of sexes as were endowed with a double disadvantage, consisting in being women and African-American. Black women were an obstacle for both white and black men as their actions could have harmed both the white gendered system and blacks' expectations for the movement achievements (equal rights). Following this path colored women were never allowed to occupy leadership

³⁷ Hayden , C. and King M., "*Sex and Caste*", in *Liberation*, November 18, 1965.

position (by Black males) even though they were working and acting as such. Men did recognize women's leadership capabilities but as a direct consequence of the gendered societal American construction, thought that their role as movement advocates should be similar to that they covered in their families and households: those of local activity organizations which included recruitment, fundraising, and working for the committees.

The "sisters in struggle"³⁸ managed to overcome social class barriers by working together, no matter their social status. Among them there were: housewives, domestic workers, beauticians, secretaries, sharecroppers, students, school teachers, professors and many others. Those same women, such as Rosa Parks³⁹ and Jo Ann Robinson⁴⁰, are now to be considered the founders of the Movement.

2.3.1. Women as bridge leaders

Women were prevented from formal leadership which means that within the various Civil Rights organizations they usually didn't have any representative roles. Their social possibilities in the organizations were the reflection of the society which automatically implies the fact that the chances for women's participation were controlled by men and for that limited.

Such pattern can be found in all movement's organizations such as the SCLC, the MIA and the SNCC.

Even though women weren't considered as formal leaders they were usually recognized according to Belinda Robnett⁴¹ as *bridge leaders* that is to say leaders with the capacity to link different people with diverse social and cultural backgrounds. As Sacks⁴² argues, colored women didn't recognize themselves as leaders as they actively chose to work quietly out of the spotlight. In her study she

³⁸ How female activists referred to themselves.

³⁹ Parks, R. and Haskins J., "*Rosa Parks: My story*", Puffin, 1999.

⁴⁰ Robinson J. A. and Garrow D. J., "*Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women who started it: the Memoir of Jo Ann Robinson*", University of Tennessee Pr, 1987, Kindle Edition.

⁴¹ Robnett, B., *op. cit.*

⁴² Sack, K., "*Carrying by the hours*", Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988; Sack, K. and Remy D., "*My troubles are going to have trouble with me*", New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1984.

ultimately redefines the general definition of leadership by assuming that leaders are someone able to guide people who trust and worship them even without an official endorsement.

The importance of such kind of leadership is to be found in the essential role the Movement played in connecting the deepest part of the segregationist Southern States with the core of the Civil Rights Movement.

In the rural South all the attempts for the achievement of equal rights had ended up strengthening the segregationist order where even the acts of voting had become a threat for the lives of Black people. After those reprisals Black rural communities felt that unlike in the big cities their only way to survive the regime was to live following the white segregationist rules. This situation which helped the spread of a feeling of helplessness was accentuated by the geographical position of these areas which precluded them to obtain national attention.

Another problem was related by the fact that the rural communities were hardly penetrable by external individuals as they were usually skeptical towards people coming from other realities.

Robnett⁴³ underlines that it is in this very rural context that the role of women as *bridge leaders* is to be considered essential since, unlike in the big cities, people were more likely to follow the lead of someone they trusted to, and had developed some kind of connections with the local communities rather than some charismatic representatives with no interest in their social context. Ministers in those cases were not considered at the bases of the local activism. On the contrary they were suspected of working with white segregationists under the belief that any kind of protest against the establishment was against God's will.

As previously stated, bridge leaders were the one who helped the central organization and such communities to connect. Following this path, Septima Clark⁴⁴ managed to create a relationship with the rural community thanks to the foundation of the Citizenship Education Program and her ability to develop some personal attachment with those people.

⁴³ Robnett, B., *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ See chapter 3, p. 59.

Clark had the capability - no one had - to understand that Black people in rural communities were conscious of their racial inequality but had no idea on how to legally «fight» for their rights because they were lacking education. Looking from a bridge leaders' perspective, Clark had the audacity to melt people's needs with the movement's goals.

Bridge leaders were usually helped by local women in entering the rural community, for the entire process of recruitment, in mobilizing people and in raising money.

Thanks to their relations with multiple organizations, which allowed them to be more independent from the principal actors of the movement and free from the hierarchical limitations, they also managed to become the souls of the entire process of recruitment in small southern cities where people believed more to a woman than to a preacher. The importance these women had received by the local Black population is to be connected to their ability to work together no matter their social/educational background. They used to have meetings in one of their houses where they set their information campaign.

Local and bridge leaders represented the missing ring between elderly black citizens who thought the movement was a merely media's creation and the young who were hoping for a change. Women were more attached to local communities while male leaders considered other external aspects such the political and strategic ones. In the history of the movement women were more preoccupied about the working-class and poor citizens, and for that they were at the bases of the creation of civic feelings.

Those are the reason why some historians now argue that without female activism the development of the Civil Rights Movement would have never achieved the proportion it actually had.

2.3.2. The role of women in Civil Rights Organizations

The Civil Rights Movement was composed by different associations, which one of them had a different charter, and different internal structures but all of them aimed to the achievement of equal rights for black citizens.

Such variety allowed women to have different roles and possibilities which mainly changed whether the leadership was coming either from the black church or from some student associations.

Here are represented some examples of women leadership's limitations in four important Civil Rights Organizations: the NAACP, the SCLC, the MIA and the SNCC.

1. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded by Moorfield Storey, Mary White Ovington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, in 1909, with the aim of focusing national support on the injustices and illegalities deriving from the application of the Jim Crow laws in Southern States. Even though the final input for its creation is connected to the 1908 Springfield, Illinois, Race Riot⁴⁵, its routes are traceable to the 1905 Niagara Movement⁴⁶ of which W.E.B. Du Bois was part of.

Its aim was to provide Black Citizen with legal counseling when they needed. The fact that most of the associates were lawyer or legal counselor made the NAACP to be perceived as an elitist association. As usual women were not as appreciated as they should have been and were usually excluded from the organizational meeting in which decisions regarding the activities of the Organization were taken. Even if they were excluded from formal leadership, local branch leaders and field secretaries were able to act with some sort of independence from the core, autonomy that would have proven their job to be essential for the entire movement.

2. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was the direct result of black preachers' interconnections during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the Conference's first meeting on January 1957 it was decided that the church would have been considered its legal base. The SCLC's aims were to end segregation without using the force and to help

⁴⁵ Crouthamel, J. L., *The Springfield Race Riot of 1908*, « The Journal of Negro History », vol. 45, n. 3, July 1960, pp. 164- 181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716259>.

⁴⁶ Jones, A., *"African American Civil Rights: Early Activism and the Niagara Movement"*, Praeger, 2011, Kindle Edition.

NAACP's activities. The fact that at the basis of the organization there was the Black Church, automatically implied that women wouldn't be able to fill the same roles men did. For instance, black ministers, thanks to their position had more sources than women had: they could easily organize meetings -as they had churches, call on people -as they had a concrete influence on them, and raise money. All opportunities that women didn't had.

The SCLC's actions usually included peaceful tactics to promote equal rights in the South mainly: boycotts and sit-ins.

Ministers occupied the higher levels within the organization while women despite of their involvement could only actively be involved, at high levels, in two area: the fund- raising department and the Citizenship Educational Program.

No matter what their experience was, women were systematically left out of the decision making process. This behavior became clear when thinking about how Ella Baker⁴⁷, an experienced activist, was treated by the Organization. Baker was hired as the acting director but only temporary as ministers hoped to hire a more "suitable" men.

Martin Luther King, himself, who had been president of the organization right from its beginning in 1957 (and would have remained such until his murder in 1968), in a letter written to Septima Clark argued that even though women had some leadership potential they were created to take care of their husband, and children.

3. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was created on December 5th, 1955, following the arrest of Rosa Parks, by E. D. Nixon, Martin Luther King, and Ralph Abernathy. It was a church led organization with only one woman in high office. The only higher position women managed to achieve were those in the welfare and membership committee as they hold the same position in churches. Female activists were limited in their actions by their male fellows. Once again it was generally acknowledged that women had leadership skills but

⁴⁷ See Chapter 4, p. 83.

their services were more needed for internal duties and neighborhood activities. Women were primary involved in activists' recruitment, fundraising and community welfare and those actions were usually transformed into anecdotal tales.

4. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) aimed to give students more voice within the Civil Rights Movement. Even though it wasn't a church-led organization and for that reason had no hierarchical structures, women were mostly excluded from leadership positions too. The leader was appointed toward a rotating chair system and the organization was endowed with an executive committee but from 1960 to 1965 all executive secretaries and chairs were given to men. All the major positions were occupied by men. Once again, women were considered capable for the job but it wasn't considered appropriate for a woman to help ruling positions. Some men argued that women didn't wanted such responsibility but from women's account a total different perspective emerges. As a direct consequence of this missed leadership women decided to do the field work and be in touch with people. With the expanding of the SNCC, in the second half of the 60s, more experienced leaders were needed, so suddenly women became eligible for the job. Women became project directors but were still discriminated as they were usually prevented to oversee to more than one field work while men did more than three. Even though they faced all possible restrictions women were an essential part of the organization and their roles were not less important than those of men.

2.3.3. Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson

In 1955 Rosa Parks⁴⁸ was a forty-two years old seamstress and NAACP's activist, more specifically she was secretary to the Montgomery leader E. D. Nixon.

In the early and mid- 1950s the NAACP's Montgomery Branch, together with the Women Political Council (WPC) were focusing their actions against the

⁴⁸ Parks, R. and Haskins J., *op. cit.*

segregated conditions in public transportation, in Montgomery, Alabama, which according to Parks were:

[...] very painful, very humiliating, and the drivers made very good use of it. Our city ordinance, of course, says that a driver has police powers in which he can enforce segregation by moving his passengers. If he desires a person to move from one seat, there should be another for this person to take it. If a colored person is sitting too near the front or somewhere near, the white person should take it; this person is ordered from a seat should have another one available. [...].⁴⁹

Before Parks' arrest, which, eventually, would spread in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, representatives of both Civil Rights Organizations had met with some city officials, complaining about the mortifying and undignified conditions which the Black population- pregnant women, children, disabled and older people included- had to suffer when using public transportation.

At the end of the meeting the Black committee only received few loose promises. As a result things got even worse:

As late as March 1955, when this fifteen- year- old girl in Montgomery, a high school girl was arrested for not giving up a seat, even much further to the rear of the bus than I was; she was handcuffed and taken to jail and of course tried and found guilty on at least three counts and put on probation. And there was another arrest in the fall, about October, of a teenage girl who refused to give up a seat, I'm sure to stand, and she paid her fine.⁵⁰

When Parks was arrested on December 1st, 1955, for not surrendering her seat in the city bus no. 2857 she wasn't acting on behalf of the NAACP or of the WPC, otherwise her defiance would have consisted in a group action, which wouldn't ended up with her arrest.

⁴⁹ Davis W. Houch, Davis E. Dixon, *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, University Press of Mississippi. Kindle Edition, pos. 812- 831.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

She was sitting in the central part of the bus, that was designated as division line between races (whites on the front and black on the back), and which was usually utilized when the bus was full. She didn't sit in the white's seats. The driver ordered her to stand up and leave the place to a white man, she refused and as a consequence of that refusal she was arrested and freed that very same night. Thanks to the helpful hand of Clifford Durr, an anti-segregationist white lawyer, who bailed her out, and E.D. Nixon, who later prepared the lawsuit which would have ended up in the Supreme Court announcement of the unconstitutionality of segregation in public transportation, she was release from prison that very same night.

The Montgomery bus boycott started on December 5th, 1955 and in that very same day Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in favor of Rosa Parks representing her as a good, decent woman as the standard of the dominant society dictated her to be.

The boycott was one of the most extraordinary examples of non- violent resistance that can ever been recalled in history. During this protest thousands of blacks refused to use the public transportation's services, and instead used bicycles, shared cars or even just walked to reach the city center, school, work, their houses and whatever other place they wanted to go.

This is only a part of the entire story, or at least the part we know. In our minds the Montgomery bus boycott started with Rosa Parks and was carried on by King, and the NAACP, but there's also a second point of view: the one of Jo Ann Robinson⁵¹, president of the Women's Political Council (WPC).

Histories of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 typically focus on Rosa Parks, who refused to yield her bus seat to a white man and a youthful Martin Luther King Jr., who became the spokesman for the black community organization set up to pursue a boycott of Montgomery's segregated city busses. In an important revision of the traditional account, this extraordinary personal memoirs reveals for the first time the earlier and more important role played by a group of middle-class black Montgomery women in creating the boycott [...].⁵²

⁵¹ Robinson J. A., and Garrow D. J., *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 45.

The WPC was founded in 1946 by Mary Fair Burks with the aims of: supporting black's civic involvement, extending black's voting registration and lobbying city representatives in order to erase racist policies. In 1950 Burks was succeeded by Jo Ann Robinson. Initially it was composed by some black middle class individual and later broadened and became public in 1955 when one of its members, Rosa Parks, was arrested.

The Council was designing the Boycott for long time before it actually started. In 1953 Mrs. Robinson made clear, together with some other activists of the NAACP, to some city official that Blacks were suffering abuses from some bus drivers; transport regulations obliged black citizen to get off of the bus after having paid their tariff and get in from the back door with the result that the driver often left before they entered the bus. In 1954 she wrote a letter with which she warned the mayor that twenty-five local organizations were ready to start the bus boycott if nothing would have changed.

When Robinson heard about Parks' arrest she secretly printed, using the Alabama State College copy shop, some ten thousand copies of an anonymous leaflet in which it was stated that another black woman had been arrested for not giving her seat to a white citizen and that all African- Americans were invited not to use public transportation from that very same day on. By dawn she organized, along with other women of the WPC, colleagues and college student, the distribution in schools, markets, barbers, beauty shops and cafés. At two in the afternoon, whether they knew it by reading the leaflet or by word of mouth, every black in Montgomery knew about the project.

No one seemed to know from where those notes came from, but they didn't care as every African- American and non-segregationist whites were secretly joyful.

That day servants, working in the houses of whites, read, without been seen, the leaflet and immediately burned it and continued their jobs as nothing had happened in order to keep the protest secret.

The majority of the leaflets had been distributed in black women's beauty shops as most of them were Civil Rights activists and members of the NAACP and used to distribute materials that would have helped blacks to register and vote.

Black beauticians were independent from whites and more educated than the average humble workers. Whether they had a salon or worked in their houses they were free from white's control as they didn't work for them. Such women could speak freely to other women and were able to encourage them to become activists or register for voting.

The protest ended on December 21st, 1956, and segregation in public transportation was finally declared unconstitutional.

2.3.4. The story of Emmett and Mamie Till

All the actions women engaged were in need of a perfect use of persuasion and rhetoric, two aspects of which they were well aware of. Women used to speak a lot to their local community but those speeches are no longer to be found as the entire media structure (both black and white) focused mainly on national relevant ones such as the immortal "I have a dream" given by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1963 Washington DC Civil Rights March. This media obscurantism helped the loss of the majority of women public talks which can actually only be recalled by personal memories and a few unprofessional damaged recordings. Memories given by meetings' participants have been helping historians in defining bridge leaders' work as an everyday invisible and unheard struggle. Those few speeches (given by women at national level) were also censured by the already explained presence of sexism and in particular by the Black church sexism. From the few we have left, it is undeniable the fact that women used to start from some painful personal facts such as the loss of their beloved ones in order to create a deep emotional connection with the audience that would hopefully enlarge the wings of the Movement.

One of the best examples (in this perspective) is the speech given by Mamie Till Bradley. On October 29th 1955, five weeks from the end of the "rightful" trail which had found the murders of her son, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, estranged to the killing, Mamie Till found the courage to give a speech to the NAACP in Baltimore. With Bobo's death her goal in life became getting other children and

their families to become more aware of the segregation's problem so they could avoid ending up as her child.

Emmett Till⁵³ was a 14 years-old African- American boy from Chicago who wanted to spend some extra time with his relatives in Money, Mississippi. His mother, Mamie Till, didn't wanted him to go as she knew his son wasn't acquainted with the southern segregated society, she very well knew as she was born down there. Ultimately, she reluctantly allowed his only child to go and stay to uncle's Mose. Bobo arrived in Money on August 21st, 1955 and a week later at 2:30 in the morning, he was taken from his uncle's house and later killed by two white men: Roy Bryant and his half- brother J.W. Milam.

It was reported that the boy went, along with his cousins and some friends, to Bryant's grocery and meat market were Roy Bryant's wife, Carolyn Bryant, was working. Emmett allegedly made eyes to Mrs. Bryant so the men of the family decided to punish the fourteen year old boy by taking his life. They tortured him for days and finally beat him to death and shot his lifeless body.

Bobo's body was later found in the Tallahatchie River.

During her speech, she gave a detailed description of her son's lifeless body condition at the Chicago Obituary and underlined the hard time she had during the identification.

The first thing that struck my attention was a big gash in his forehead. It was big enough for me to stick my hands through. I said they must have done this with an ax. I saw something that I imagine was his brains down there. Then I looked over here and I saw a gash that was so large you could look right through and tell that every tooth in the back had been knocked out. [...]. But Emmett didn't have any back teeth at all, he just had about 6 perhaps, right across the front. I could tell because his mouth had been chocked open. His tongue was out. His lips were twisted and his teeth were bared just like a snarling dog's [...]. And then I looked at his nose. There was another hole. I notice that somebody had the nerve to put a bullet in his brain. I wondered why they wasted a bullet because surely it wasn't necessary. [...]. And I looked at his one eye over here, that was bulging out. His

⁵³ Till-Mobley M., Benson C., Jackson J., *“Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America”*, Random House, 2011, Kindle Edition.

eyes were very light in color, and I said that certainly is his eye. And then I looked over here it seemed that the right eye had been picked out with a nut picker, so I couldn't really go by that.

[...]. That's when I walked around on the left-hand side of him and looked. It looked as if somebody had taken a criss- cross knife and gone insane on the left side of his face. It was beat into a pulp.⁵⁴

Emmett's murder had such an important impact on the entire community (not only African- American) that more than five thousand citizens arrived to the parlor to pay him their respects. The day of the funeral events went even stronger as the entire city of Chicago was blocked by the crowd who wanted to attend the function.

Such a multitude gave Mamie Till the courage to let anyone who mourned his son to see what some white Mississippians had done to her little boy. She stated that « [...] as long as we cover these things up they're going to keep on happening [...] »⁵⁵. The decision to let anyone see Emmett's corpse, together with a holiday period, caused a two days delay in his burial. In those days more than 600.000 people went to the church, the majority of whom, both men and women, felt sick or fainted at the sight of the body. No human being could ever do what two Mississippi's men had done to Bobo.

Those people walked twenty- four hours a day. [...] I'm told that the traffic was tied up from Saturday afternoon until Tuesday at the close of the funeral. People were interested. They wanted to know what was happening. One would go out and tell another and more than 600.00 people looked at Emmett Louis (Bobo) Till.

When they walked in that church, they had one feeling. But when they looked down in that casket, they got another. Men fainted and women fainted. I'm told that one out of every ten went to their knees and had to be carried out. [...].⁵⁶

⁵⁴Davis W. Houch, Davis E. Dixon, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, University Press of Mississippi. Kindle Edition, pos. 482- 581.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pos. 582.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pos. 593.

In the wake of the murder few newspapers, bothered to write about the Mississippi's event. *The Logansport* in Indiana, the *Brownsville*, the *Waco*, the *Galveston* and *El Paso* in Texas, the *Racine* and the *Sheboygan* in Wisconsin, the *Oxnard* in California and the *Lowell* in Massachusetts they all reproduced the story that was given by the *Associated Press* in Mississippi, which in poor words was: a young fourteen years old Black was kidnapped after whistling to a white married woman; his body was found three days later. Not one of those articles were published in newspaper's front page which, along with the poor lines used to describe the facts, didn't helped the spread of the news at national level.

The massive participation to Emmett's funeral couldn't be ignored by the media, though. Pictures of this young corpse were published in some of the most important magazines of Chicago so that anyone would have felt compassion not only for this mother and her baby boy but also for the entire African American community which every day was fighting and preventing the happening of such inhuman actions. The images of a disfigured and unrecognizable Bobo, published by the *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender's*, shocked the non-segregationist part of the American society. Things were about to take an international perspective.

This was the first time Northern people, both Black and white, saw directly what was happening in the Southern racist states- which thanks to their distance from the core, a.k.a. Washington, thought they were immune from the jurisdiction of the Federal Government. No dismembered bodies, nor their pictures had ever came out of Mississippi, and Emmett's obviously wasn't supposed to, but this time a child from the North was killed, so hiding their actions wouldn't be easy.

Everyone had always known, or at least had heard about, the situation in Southern states and in this case in Mississippi, but no one cared enough to move.

The point is: if you don't see, you'll cover yourself with a veil of hypocrisy- "I heard so, but it can't be, I don't believe it, It's impossible!"- but, if you see with your own eyes, the same eyes you use to look at the sea, at the mountains, or to read, than you can't concealed yourself, you have to take a stand.

When the murder trial against Bryant and Milam started on September 19th, 1955 it didn't seemed that the two were worried about the murder inquiring, what was

worse was that the entire white community and its juridical system (cops, sheriff, lawyers, judges) seemed to support, or at least justify their actions.

Mamie Till was harshly criticized for been there but she didn't cared because been present in court was the only thing she could have done for her late son.

For the first time the Northern press came down to document the event. The trial opened in Sumner, Mississippi and the selected jury was composed by only white southerner citizens.

Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant went to the washroom unescorted without handcuffs. They had their children on their laps and they spanked them playfully. They hugged their wives and kissed their mothers. They were just privileged characters. Than we had this jury that looked alike, well I just can't really tell you what they looked alike. But the way that they looked at us, you'd have thought we came from outer space.

The big question in their mind was, what business did we have down there. It was Mississippi's problem and Mississippi was going to handle it. But without the newspapers and the press news agencies, there never would have been a trial in Mississippi [...].⁵⁷

During the inquiring both whites and blacks were interviewed by the judge, but African- American testimonies were poorly considered as in the cases of Willie Reed and Amanda Bradley who had respectively heard hollering and whipping in Milam's Barn. In the speech Mamie Till remembered Reed deposition during the trial:

Little Willie Reed stood up there and told he saw Emmett Till in the back of a truck that Mr. Milam was in. he describes how there were four white men in the cab and four colored men in the back. One of these four colored people, he said, was my boy. He was sitting in the floor of the truck. He recognized him from a picture that he saw in the newspaper. [...] Willie Reed saw Mr. Bryant when he got out of the truck [...] and he also heard a lot on noise out of the barn. He heard a voice screaming. He heard a boy crying for his life, calling for his mother and

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, pos. 656.

calling on God. He heard him begging for mercy and he heard the blows that were being struck on the boy. [...] He also saw Mr. Milam walk up to the pump with a gun still around his waist. It was the same gun he had when he went to my uncle's house and took the boy out of bed. [...] Pretty soon there was no more noise.⁵⁸

Within the whites statements the one given by county sheriff H. C. Strider, when he doubted that the disfigured body belonged to Emmett Till, was the most wrongful and unrespectable one. He argued that the body found was most likely that of a eighteen years old who had been in the water for the past four or five days.

On September 23rd, the trial ended and both Milam and Bryant were found “not guilty”.

Protests aroused in the Northern States, people were protesting against both the segregationist systems, which allowed two murderers to live freely, and its institutions which were clearly undemocratic: a judge should have never cleared two men on whose count there were serious and real depositions of guilt, and a sheriff who after swearing in the Bible had gave a false testimony.

The fact had also an international consequence. On the day of the verdict thousands of people in Paris participated to a protest organized by the International League against Racism⁵⁹ and denounced both the Mississippi court for the acquittal of the two assassins and the American government for not taking a stand with the process discharge. They argued that with this sentence the judge had legalized the lynching.

As the Congressman Adam Clayton Powell⁶⁰ stated both European and African were horrified by the resolution of the trial which would inevitably had ruin the US credibility abroad.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, pos. 812.

⁵⁹ The International League against Racism and Anti- Semitism or LICRA (Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme) was founded in 1927 with the aims of fighting xenophobia, exclusion and intolerance.

⁶⁰ Adam Clayton Powell Jr.: November 29, 1908 – April 4, 1972 was an American politician and Baptist pastor.

How can a country describe itself as the “land of freedom” or the “bulk of a perfect democracy”, which it wants to export by occupying other lands, if its own citizens have not the same rights? It can't.

Things got even worse when on January 24th, 1956 Milan and Bryant during an interview with *Look* magazine admitted the kidnapping, the torturing and the final killing of Emmett Till. Even though rage was growing within the entire black and white non-segregationist communities there was nothing institutions could do as the two murderers were protected by the Double Jeopardy Clause which states that no one can be tried more the one time for the same crime.

The murder of Emmett Till, along with Rosa Parks action, is to be considered a catalyzer for the development of the entire movement. Activists identified themselves with him because in 1955 they had the same age. What happened to Emmett could have happened to each one of them.

Such brutal killings weren't unusual in the deepest south, especially in Mississippi, but were always covered up by local media. For this murder, things went in a very different way as Bobo was not a southern Black boy but a northern one. Up north Black people were considered integrant part of the society which means they had the same rights as whites, that the law was equal for any race and no one would have never avoid a conviction for murder just because the victim was an African- American.

This unacceptable murder had such an important resonance that Bob Dylan wrote, produced and recorded a song, entitled “*The Death of Emmett Till*”, in which he describes all the facts as they developed and gives a warning to the nation:

Twas down in Mississippi	
Not so long ago	Some men they dragged him to
When a young boy from	a barn
Chicago Town	And there they beat him up
Walk in a southern door	They said they had a reason
This boy's fateful tragedy	But I disremember what
We should all remember well	They tortured him and did some
The color of his skin was black	things
And his name was Emmett Till	Too evil to repeat

There was screamin' sounds
inside the barn
There was laughin' sound out on
the street

They dragged his body to a
gulch
Amidst a bloodred rain
And they threw him in the
waters wide
To cease his screaming pain
The reason that they killed him
there
And I'm sure it ain't no lie
He was a blackskin boy
So he was born to die

And so to stop these United
States
Of yelling for a trial
Two brothers they confessed
that they
Killed poor Emmett Till
But on the jury there were men
Who helped the brother commit
this awful crime
And so this trial was a mockery
But nobody seemed to mind

I saw the morning paper
But I could not bear
To see the brothers smiling
On that courthouse stairs
For the jury found them
innocent

And the brothers they went free
Whilt Emmett's body floats the
foam
Of a Jim Crow southern sea

If you can't speak out against
this kind of thing
A crime that's so unjust
Your eyes are filled with
deadman's dirt
Your mind is filled with dust
Your arms and legs, they must
be in shackles and chains
And your blood it must cease to
flow
For you'd let this human race
Sink so God-awful low

This song is just a reminder
To tell my fellow man
That this kind of thing still lives
today
In that ghost-robed Klu Klux
Klan
But if we all then think alike
If we give all we can give
We'd make this Great land of
ours
An even greater place to live.⁶¹

⁶¹ "The Death of Emmett Till" Song first sang by Bob Dylan on February 1962. Track included in his 2010 record *The Bootleg Series Vol. 9- the Witmark Demos 1962-1964*"; <https://www.antiwarsongs.org/canzone.php?lang=it&id=6910>; <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/till/tillSONG.html>.

2.4. The March on Washington

When Kennedy expressed his intention to pass a new Civil Rights legislation (during his February 28th, 1963 remark), African-American leaders started to organizing a March, with the aim of focusing national attention to the problem and helping their cause.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom⁶² took place on August 28th, 1963, on the same day Emmett Till⁶³ was killed eight years before. It was the biggest gathering the Civil Rights Movement managed to organize. Almost 250.000 people marched in the Capital asking to stop the political and social injustices African-Americans were still facing after one hundred years from the Emancipation.

The organizers decided that it would be a peaceful March, in line with Martin Luther King non-violence principle. Anyway, internal marshals were trained in order to keep the order between the crowd if the events would have requested it.

When the multitude reached the Lincoln Memorial, major leaders took the stand and gave their speech. The people who took the stage were: Rev. Patrick O'Boyle, A. Philip Randolph, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, John Lewis, Walter Reuther, Rabbi Uri Miller, Whitney M. Young, Matthew Ahman, Roy Wilkins, Rabbi Joachim Prinz and Martin Luther King.

That afternoon, King was the last speaker. No one else wanted to give the final speech because they thought that by noon all the media would have gone, but King stepped in. In the original program he wasn't schedule to speak but as Medgar Evers, who was supposed to talk was assassinated on June 12th, 1963, he decided to take his place.

While King was giving his remark, Mahalia Jackson stood out form the stage and asked King to talk about "the dream". King who didn't programmed to give that speech decided to satisfy Jackson's request and gave the unforgettable speech "*I have a dream*".

⁶²Jones, P. W., "*The March on Washington: jobs, freedom, and the forgotten history of the Civil Rights*", New York, W. W. Norton & Company.

⁶³ See subchapter 2.3.3, p. 37.

The March on Washington was undoubtedly a powerful action, and some historians argue that it functioned as a catalyst for the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, but women were missing.

Like the Movement, the March proven itself gendered. Female leaders were asked to march together with the male leaders' wives, and in order to avoid this circumstance they programmed a parallel parade which would have flown into the biggest one at Lincoln Memorial. While the main parade was marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, female leaders such as Rosa Parks and Daisy Bates were advancing toward Independence Avenue.

When they joined the stage male leaders honored only five female leaders: Mahalia Jackson, Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Rosa Parks and Gloria Richardson, the others were not even mentioned. Women were not scheduled to give important speeches to the crowd, all but Daisy Bates who spoke a one- hundred forty-two words in front of the crowd.

From 1963 a lot of marches had been taken, and the latest was on the January 21st, 2017, Women's March on Washington. As stated by the organizers the idea for such a protest came from a Hawaiian grandmother who asked forty of her friends to go to Washington with her and protest against the new President. Those friends of her called on other friends, and soon the proposition broke the social networks where coordinating groups were created.

As a result, it is estimated that more than 500.000 people, men and women of all ages took part to the event in Washington.

Unlike the other Marches which only took place in single cities, this one managed to organize protests in fifty-one American States and two inhabited states (Guam and Puerto Rico) for a total of 465 marches in the United States to which have to be added the other 600 that spread around the world.

Marchers were protesting in favor of Women Civil Rights, and as far as American were concerned against President Trump's election. Actually, American citizens were protesting because women's rights, together with those of other minorities, are put at stake by the new elected President.

2.5. South- African women: united for freedom

At first sight it appears that all of the Civil Rights Movement's enterprises were masterfully developed by both their leaders and organizers, but looking closer it is clear that some of the most famous actions they undertook were inspired by other movement's actions. This is the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott⁶⁴ and of the March on Washington⁶⁵.

If the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott was inspired by the South-African 1952 Defiance Campaign, the glorified 1963 March on Washington was constructed around the 1956 Women March on Pretoria.

Stressing from those facts a small parenthesis on South- African women activism is overdue.

«*Wathint' abafazi wathint' imbokodo*», “*who touch a woman, touch a rock*”, these are the worlds South-African women sang while marching toward the Union Buildings, headquarter of the racist government led by Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom⁶⁶, in Pretoria, on August 9th, 1956.

In 1956 South Africa was still controlled by the “modern” British Crown which was supported or didn't bother to stop the apartheid regime. Such administration found its basis on the very creation of the South- African Union in 1910 when the white European minority (less than the 21% of the population) was ruling over the 60% black majority and on other small ethnicities (mainly Indians). Blacks, mulattoes and Indians were prevented from having any relationships with whites except working for them, this meant that they couldn't achieve decent jobs. Interracial marriages were strictly forbidden and the presence of non-white people, in urban areas was kept under control. Blacks were ultimately banned from voting and obliged to live in townships (sort of slums where the Black population was obliged to live) controlled by the police. Following this apartheid regime, in 1913 the government, in the Orange Free State, tried to introduce monthly renewable passes for women, living in the slums, who needed to reach

⁶⁴ See subchapter 2.3.2. p. 34.

⁶⁵ See subchapter 2.4. p. 50.

⁶⁶ July 14th, 1893- August 24th, 1958. He was the 6th South- African Prime Minister and remained in charge of the government from November 30th, 1954 to August 24th, 1958.

the urban center of the city. Women replied by collecting signature, planning protests (hundreds got arrested) and with other acts of civil disobedience which went on, with decreasing iteration, for the following seven years. Finally, the request for passes was pulled back up until the 1950s when the government engaged some oppressive actions strictly directed toward the Black majority.

In 1952 the Native Laws Amendment Act was issued. This law forbade Africans to remain in the urban area for more than seventy-two hours unless they: lived permanently in the same district for more than fifteen years; had been working for the same chief for the same amount of years; or were born there. This situation had a direct consequence on women too as they could only live there if they were married to one of those men allowed to, or were their unwed daughters.

In the same year the Native Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Document Act, was emanated. Basically, it obliged Africans to own a reference book in which all the information about the individual (job, name and last name, place of the legal residence, taxes' payment) were contained. The law also stated that Black women too, starting from a non-precise date, would be obliged, for the first time, to have the same book. Women felt outraged by this decision because for the first time their freedom of movement was been threatened in favor of a very precise minority: the white one which had removed the native Black population from their land starting with the first colonization.

Even though these two Acts were issued in 1952 it wasn't up until 1954, for the first, and 1956, for the latter, that they were applied.

Without regard to the application years, in June 1952 the African National Congress (ANC) and the South- African Indian Congress (SAIC) started the so called Defiance Campaign. Numbers of acts of protest against the new government regulations took place. Those actions were mostly non-violent, so the deployment of a heavy-equipped police, the government had designated, wasn't needed. People from different background, ethnicities, sexes bonded together against the apartheid system and started various acts of protest and civil disobedience which included the burning of the passes, wearing the flag of the ANC, going to whites-only area and getting arrested. What is interesting in this context is that people actually wanted to get arrested and during their trial they

didn't wanted a lawyer by their side, they just shut down as their ultimate aim was to bring the prison system to collapse. Women were main activists during the Campaign: some as Florence Matomela⁶⁷ and Fatima Meer⁶⁸ were arrested while others like Bibi Dawood⁶⁹ enrolled 800 volunteers.

When the government led by Strijdom announced, in September 1955, that reference books would have become compulsory for women starting from January 1956 activists started challenging the institutions. They opposed the rulers with all the strength they had, because passes didn't only imply a restriction of movement but were also dividing families and restricting freedom.

By the time women started their protesting campaign, they already had a quite strong female organization behind their back, the Federation of South African Women⁷⁰ (FSAW), established the year before. On October 27th, 1955 despite government obstructionism and intimidation, women managed to create a peaceful protest in which they marched toward the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Almost 2000 women whites, blacks, Indians, and colored participated.

From that moment on the problem of the reference books became one of the major problems women had to face. Starting from late 1955 the women within the FSAW started to organize meetings in various cities of the country. Those gatherings were ostracized by the government that seemed to react with only oppressive measures and went on with the reference book's policies. They experimented the pass in the small town of Winburg where the FSAW wasn't present, as in other cities, and for that, women were not well informed about the issue. On March 22nd, 1956, 1429 black women received their book.

As soon as Lilian Ngoyi⁷¹ (who the year before, thanks to the successful march on Pretoria, managed to become the first black president of the ANC) and other men

⁶⁷ 1910-1969. She was a teacher, Civil Rights and anti-apartheid activist. She was part of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League and Vice-President Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW/FSAW).

⁶⁸ August 12th, 1928- March 12th, 2010. She was a writer, an academic and anti-apartheid and Civil Rights activist of Indian origins.

⁶⁹ Ayesha Bibi "Asa" Dawood, born on January 31st, 1927. Civil Rights and anti-apartheid activist, trade unionist and political.

⁷⁰ Created in 1953 with the aim of connect women in order to allow each one of them to participate to the anti-apartheid activism.

⁷¹ Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, also known as Ma or Mama Ngoy born on September 25th, 1911 and died on March 13th, 1980. She was a South-African Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid activist, first black female president of the ANC.

and women knew of Winburg they rushed into town in order to inform people about the problem. Lilian Ngoyi made the speech, and with her powerful rhetoric, she convinced women to burn their book right in front of the magistrate's office. Even though such a powerful act was made, the racist government didn't care and continued its distribution (of the books), but each time they started to, some protest rose. This situation went on until August 9th, 1956 when from between 10.000 to 20.000 women orderly marched towards the Union Buildings giving life to what became the biggest manifestation ever held in the history of South-Africa. Women from all around the country- whether they were whites, colored, blacks or Indians- arrived in Pretoria carrying their children, their nieces and nephews, their grandchildren, and in some cases black women were accompanied by the white children they took care of. They all arrived in Pretoria using public transportation. That day, women were everywhere. The march was indeed organized by the FSAW and led by four South-African women of different races to represent all women, those women were: Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams.

When they reached the government buildings, Ngoyi recommended women to keep silence for an entire thirty minutes. After that, they turned their feet and marched back to their homes singing what would have become the South-African national anthem "*Nkosi sikeleli Afrika*".

That day became quickly one of the most important for the entire history of the nation.

When the apartheid regime finally ended in 1991, monuments were rose to commemorate those empowering women and August 9th became the national day of women.

PART TWO

Chapter 3: Septima Poinsette Clark

*“The greatest evil in our country
today is...ignorance...
We need to be taught
to study rather than
to believe”*



3.1. Early life and influences

Septima Eartha-line Clark (nee Poinsette) was born in Charleston, South Carolina on May 3rd, 1898, to Peter Poinsette and Victoria Warren Anderson Poinsette.

Before the abolition of slavery, Peter was a slave in the Joel Poinsette Farm, he didn't know who his father was but the possibilities that his birth was a direct consequence of his mother's raping (possibly by one of the men of the Poinsette family) were highly probable. Clark underlined the fact that her grandmother had other four children « a black daughter; two brown sons, Samuel and Henry; and a blue-

eyed white son named Thomas»⁷². Her father's tales of slavery would have proven fundamental for the development of Septima's educational qualities. Peter once told her daughter that as a slave he could not attend school, but that he had been charged by his masters to escort his wife's son to school. When they reached the school Peter took the white's boy books from the carriage and brought them into the classroom where the pupil took his seat and attended classes while the slave was waiting for him outside. While her father was telling to his daughter such a story, Clark later remembered that she loved to think « that although the little boy who years later would be my father did not have the opportunity to learn what was in those books he was carrying for the other little boy, he then got the desire to discover some day for himself the exiting and stimulating things in them»⁷³.

Sadly Peter remained illiterate for his entire life, and ultimately learned to write his name during World War I. Even though he never went to school Peter wanted his children to be properly educated. Clark recalled that she never got disciplined by her father until the day she decided she didn't want to attend classes.

Her mother, had Native American descendants, and was born in Charleston as a free woman. When she was few years old her entire family moved to Haiti, hoping for a better future. She was a very proud woman because of her ability to write and read differentiated her from the majority of the black Charlestonians, her husband included. She had a lot of prejudices, for example she disliked dark skinned people and didn't allowed her children to play with mulattoes, that is to say with children born outside of the wedlock.

She was a laundry woman who refused categorically to work for some white families.

It is clear that between the two of them, her father was the most influential figure in Clark's life.

In 1904 Septima was enrolled by her parents to Shaw Memorial School. There Clark and her classmate (there were more or less a hundred of them) had a white teacher who spent the majority of her time in escorting the students to the toilets, which were collocated outside of the building, and reminding them white

⁷²Clark, S., *Echo in my soul*, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1962, p. 14.

⁷³ Charron Mellen, K., *Freedom's teacher: the life of Septima Clark*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009, Kindle Edition, p. 23.

superiority. Probably those women felt ashamed to teach to some black pupils. Clark remembered that she started hating the school when she very proudly greeted her teacher in the streets who promptly turned her back on her.

When she finished the eighth grade, Victoria enrolled her at Avery where for the first time Septima enjoyed the school. There, teachers were not embarrassed to teach to black students and not even to share the dormitory with their black counterpart. In Avery Clark understood that sooner or later the two races would have been able to coexist. In 1916 she received her license to teach.

Her father and the experiences she had at Shaw Memorial School and at Avery are fundamental for the development of her future actions.

3.2. Teaching at Johns Island

In 1916 Septima started teaching in Johns Island where she remained for two years until summer 1918.

In those years the State of South Carolina spent \$0.95 for each black children's education while they invested \$48.59 in whites. Such differences were tangible in the teaching conditions. Unlike white classes, black's ones had between fifty and a hundred students, who were relegated in small precarious rooms. Teachers usually worked only for three and a half month per year (as in those others months children had to work), earning one-third of the monthly pay of their white's counterparts. Even though they lived in misery, black teachers had something whites didn't had: they were symbol for the black communities in which they taught. Parents trusted teachers because they had the ability to teach to their children how to read and write, not to mention math. Knowing these disciplines would have created more independent human beings capable of taking care of themselves without the need to rely into some white. Clark recalled that an ex-slave approached her, and said « once I was whipped simply because it was thought I opened a book»⁷⁴. Parents couldn't go to school when they were young, so now their children had to learn so that they could vindicate what was once took away from them. Education was freedom. When it became clear that parents wanted

⁷⁴Ivi, pos. 1166.

their children to study for more than three and a half month per year, African – American schools started to be funded almost totally by northern organizations, and, economic conditions permitted, by the local community.

When the eighteen year old Clark arrived in Johns Island the situation was very different from the one prospected before. Teachers in rural areas were not sufficiently trained because they didn't needed too as children were sent to work by their parents, and Septima, in Johns Island's environment, was quite an outcast. Someone might ask why Clark ended up in such condition if she was a good, trained teacher. The problem was related to segregation. Black teachers weren't allowed to work in Charleston's public school and were segregated in rural areas where education wasn't considered of primary importance. Teachers working in such areas didn't have book, nor furniture, or heating and all the primary elements teachers need to do their job.

Clark recalled the difficulties she founded when she started working at Johns Island's Promise Land School. Her class was « [...] a long cabin with one long room divided in half by a chimney»⁷⁵. There were no glasses in the window so children sitting there were cold while those next to the chimney were sweating. The benches had no back support so sitting there wasn't comfortable. Classes were scheduled to last for eight months but Clark stayed in the Island for the rest of the months (Christmas time and summer excluded) even though most of the students didn't attend classes frequently. Anyway she was entrusted to educate students from the fifth to the eighth grade, but many were almost her age. As Clark stated, older students started attending classes right after Thanksgiving, when all the cotton had been collected, and stopped in early spring when they had to sow the fields. Younger children went to almost all classes because unlike their older classmates their parents didn't oblige them to work in the fields.

Even though the majority of the children didn't attend classes, teachers were supported by their parents who seemed to deeply care about their children's education when they were not obliged to work. Clark noticed that her authority was never questioned by parents who seemed to support all her disciplinary decisions.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, pos. 1324.

Back in those times it wasn't new for black teacher to organize in parent- teachers associations (PTAs) which, especially in rural area, were important because they helped teachers in educating parents by finding common goals. Clark decided to start a PTA called «Johns Island parents, for persons illiterate and entirely unused to modern ways»⁷⁶.

With the passing of the time Clark got more found of Islanders. When she firstly arrived she thought the adults were just not interested in education but with the passing of the time she realized she was wrong. In all rural areas children used to give to their teachers the money they earned working, so that they could buy some school materials or build a new school, and teachers were supposed to help their families in their every- day life. That's exactly what was happened to Clark: parents were giving her money for the school and she was helping them calculating the total costs of the seeds they needed, recording business deals, writing and reading to them some letters. In short time, adults wanted to be able to do the things that she did: they wanted to write and to read their own letters, to keep their bookkeeping, and do elementary math.

Basically what happened was that in time adults wanted to be educated so teachers in the rural south had a second job, and Septima was proud of been able to help them as in Charleston County 26.6% of the African-American population was uneducated. She argued that « I felt I was in a position as the school teacher in the community to help them in some small way at least toward achieving a better life»⁷⁷. In the contest of Johns Island she learned how to organize a community and she started developing her bottom- up approach to participation.

Clark was outraged by the condition in which the students had to attend classes, but was more shocked when she founded out the Island had a dramatically high infant mortality. Families and especially mothers had no time to look after their newborns because they had to work for some white employers, and babies were left alone. It seemed to Clark that those people were still living in a slave condition.

Clark salary, for teaching to 132 students, amounted to thirty- five dollars a month, the majority of which was directed to her family, while the white teacher,

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, pos. 1635.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, pos. 1714.

from the other end of the street, who was teaching to three students was receiving a monthly eighty-five dollars pay.

The experience at Johns Island was essential for the development of the future “mother of the movement” because all the battles she engaged were the same she started there, that is to say her fights for equal pay and treatment, women’s care and activism, and adult education.

3.3. Experiencing the NAACP

In 1918 Clark was asked by Avery principal, Benjamin Cox, to join his staff, position she accepted believing it was a great opportunity.

Not long, after she started working at Avery, she joined the local branch of the NAACP – established in 1917- which was asking to the Board of School Commissioners and its General Assembly to hire black teachers in black public school.

The point of the entire campaign was that « there must be reciprocity in love, affection, and sympathy between the teacher and the pupil»⁷⁸, and as far as Clark was concerned she totally agreed with such a vision for both point of views of the student that she had been (mistreated by her white teacher), and the teacher that she was. As a teacher she could have benefited from the ability to choose whether she wanted to work in a rural or in an urban area.

On November 30th, the local NAACP branch deposited the appeal to the city school board and reminded to white officials that they were common, decent people who were just asking to teach to their children and that following segregation rules, it would have been appropriating to white teachers to teach to white children and to their black counterparts to educate colored pupils. Such a statement was a dangerous one as it could enforce segregationist restrictions toward blacks, and that is exactly what happened.

The Board of School Commissioners and the NAACP met on January 9th, 1919. In two days the Board rejected the proposal stating that they were not « in a

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, pos. 1904.

position to change the personnel of the teaching staff in the colored school»⁷⁹. Following this statement the Association decided to appeal to the state legislature. The answer of white's Charlestonians to such audacious action was immediate. Clark remembered that they were arguing that no one black wanted their children to be taught by another African-American, in fact the NAACP was fulfilling the mulattoes and not the interests of the entire black race. This view was soon shared by the Board. At this point in order to demonstrate that what whites were saying was wrong the NAACP started a campaign in which they aimed to collect the signatures of all those colored people who wanted their children to be taught by black educators.

Septima Poinsette Clark offered to help. She was in fact convinced that it was a good occasion to educate black citizen. When she went door to door asking colored people to sign she had to explain to them what was the campaign about, what were the aims. Those people started asking questions, they wanted to know more about the theme, and Clark –like other activists- answered to all their questions. They were educating blacks, who started feeling empowered by their involvement into the biggest effort the black community had engaged since the reconstruction. They were feeling part of something important. Ultimately the NAACP affiliates managed to put together some 4.551 signatures, corresponding to two-third of the Charleston's black population.

It was way more than clear that the statements of the white representatives were just not true.

Finally on February 3rd, Superintendent Rhett gave to Sen. Harleston a paper produced by the school board in which it was written that starting for September 1st, 1920 black teacher would have been hired in Charleston public schools with the task of educate colored children. In 1920 fifty- five teachers, all women but one, were hired.

This victory meant a lot: first of all black Charlestonian had, finally, the same right, to receive an education, of the other African- American pupils in the State, secondly it was the first win the NAACP was able to achieve under the Mason-Dixon line, and third it proved to Clark that been an activist was worthy.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, pos. 1942.

In her book, *Echo in my soul*, Clark remembered that period and the campaign in which she was engaged:

[...] a lot of people in downtown Charleston said that only mulattoes wanted their daughters to work in the schools, but that chauffeurs and cooks didn't mind whatsoever. [...] That's when we put on the door to door campaign. Some people wrote their names on pieces of paper bags to say that they wanted their daughters to work in the public school as well. I was teaching at Avery then. I was teaching the sixth grade. So I took my class one day, with the permission of the principal, and we walked the streets from one door to another and received those signatures. [...] And the following year we had Negro principals. We had been victorious in this my effort to establish for Negro citizens [...].⁸⁰

With such a loss whites had to take some actions: first of all they applied the traditional rules of segregation to school, measure to which the NAACP didn't react until after the end of War World II, and secondly it was decided that only unmarried black women were allowed to teach in the city public schools.

3.4. Finding the way

In 1927- after a disastrous marriage, the deaths of her first newborn in 1921 and of her husband in 1925- Clark and her son Nerie Clark Jr. went back to Johns Island. There she witnessed some improvements mainly regarding the conditions of the school building, but teachers were still trying to figure out how to improve student's learning in a too crowded classroom in which pupils had different ages and knowledges.

Living in Johns Island came with a price: she was obliged to send his son to live with his paternal grandparents as the living conditions offered by the Island weren't suitable for an infant child.

During summer 1929 she registered at Booker T. Washington School, which was a very well- known public school in South Carolina, where she followed a course dedicated to black teachers. Septima's works impressed Principal Cornell A.

⁸⁰ Clark, S., *op. cit.*, p. 61.

Johnson to the point he asked her to join his staff. She accepted the proposal because working in Columbia meant that she would have worked in better conditions, with a higher salary, and she would have been able to see her son more often. Booker T. Washington School soon became her jumping off point: it was there that she undertook the African-American struggle for freedom.

In her years in Columbia she focused on women's organizations that aimed to improve education and democratic processes. She joined the Palmetto State Teachers' Association (PSTA), of which the majority of teachers working in Columbia were affiliates. The aim of the Association was to equalize African-American schools with the whites one, with particular attention to funds, wages, teacher's training and on school building's conditions. In the early-30s, when Clark became involved, PSTA was one of the most important qualified blacks' organizations. Such membership introduced Septima to the fight for equal academic chances.

Even though PSTA leaders were male, 80% of the organization was composed by women working in rural schools. Such percentage is not shocking as the majority of the teaching force was composed by women. The PSTA would have proven essential for her work in both Highlander Folk School and the Citizenship Education Program, because it was there that she learned mutual respect and how to share ideas, frustration, and knowledge and turned them into common plans for the improvement of educating condition.

The majority of teachers participated also to other women-led-organizations that aspired to improved civic conditions. Clark was obviously one of them. More specifically she became engaged with the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women (SCFCW), which was associated with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) whose purpose of promoting « [...] education of colored women and to hold an educational convention annually; to work for the social, moral and economic, and religious welfare of women and children; and to secure and enforce civil and political rights for our group»⁸¹.

Being involved in such organizations meant that teachers were closer to the communities in which they lived, and this proximity was at the basis of the trust

⁸¹ Charron Mellen, K., *op. cit.*, pos. 2757.

relations that local adults engaged with teachers. Such kinds of relations were necessities for Clark's future project of educating adults. In her civic involvement Septima realized that adult needed to be educated because they had to be able to participate in their community life by becoming active and full citizens.

Following this line of taught on March 25th, 1935 she started teaching at Gray's Richland County Adult School where her class was composed by eleven women and three men. Adults school education did not worked as classical classes in which the teacher talked while the students listened and took notes, or at least not only. Classes were similar to an assembly in which each of the presents exposed its problems which were analyzed and resolved by common experience. In her classes Clark educated to social citizenship, economic, and literacy. She taught to them how to read street signals, to complete documents, to write down in a piece of paper their names, but more importantly she encouraged them to occupy their free time in reading a book, a newspaper so that they would have trained their reading skills, and at the same time they would have started developing interest for the events surrounding them and the environment in which they were living. Being able to read, write and count allowed adult black people to develop their skills in problem solving and to bring their attention in some important social matters such as health care.

Teaching to such particular students required a lot of patience and if in Johns Island she taught starting from what her audience wanted to discuss about, at Gray's things were different, there was a specific pedagogical procedure. Learners had first to be taught how to write their names. The action of writing their names, multiple times in a piece of cardboard was very important because by the time students were able to put together all the letters they needed to compose their names, they had become familiar with vocals and consonants, which meant that they were able to match a sound with a specific line in a piece of paper. Such achievements are at the basis of the ability to write and read. After adults had learned how to write their names the school gave them a brochure, containing some basic notion about the state of South Carolina, to teach and improve their reading skills.

One of Gray's goal was to create active civic citizens, and in order to that they started organizing annual trip to Washington. The majority of black South Carolinians had never left their state, the situation of poverty in which they lived didn't allow them to buy a pair of new shoes, a trip was not even conceivable. When asked by the teachers on what were their feelings regarding the journey, they confessed that they couldn't sleep at night when they thought about how many people they would have seen in just one place. In Washington they visited the State House and had the occasion of signing the visitor's register which was a very empowering action. When we sign a register we do it automatically, it's not such a big deal, but for black adults signing those register had a very profound meaning: for the first time they were feeling part of the state and the act of signing gave them the confidence they didn't have before, they felt like they were citizens, not to mention that this new ability would have allowed them to register for vote.

Septima particularly enjoyed those travels because they held a progressive idea of creating citizenship and create a feeling of cultural belonging: they listened to the speeches given by some important black representatives, and to black music and poetry. When they got home they reported everything they had done in their travel, and this action pushed other colored people to Gray's because they wanted to make the same experience a neighbor, a friend, or a relative had done.

The years Clark spent at Gray's are to be considered the catalyzers of her entire activity in Highlander Folk School and in the Citizenship Program, because it was there that she understood that in order to feel part of the state, to feel real citizen, people, and in this case, black people needed to learn, to be educated to common knowledge.

In the 1940s she participated to the NAACP's crusade for black and white teachers' equalization of salaries. Clark considered her involvement in such action as her first "revolutionary" engagement because it was « the first time I had worked against people directing a system for which I was working»⁸².

She was so sure of her reasons that she tried to convince her colleagues, who didn't wanted, to participate to the cause because they had been threatened. The

⁸² Charron Mellen, K., *op. cit.*, p. 150.

threat consisted in the submission of a more difficult test for all teachers if the government of South Carolina had to provide equal salary for every teacher. This was a serious problem for the majority of black educators because they were less trained than their white counterparts (someone had only the eighth grade degree), and having to pass the same tests that were given to whites would be a hard job. In addition to the threat teachers were afraid they would have been fired if they were recognized as part of the equalization campaign. Septima together with other NAACP activists tried to convince their colleagues that this wasn't a possible scenario because « South Carolina law requires that well- founded accusations of misconducts or inefficiency be proved before a teacher can be discharged»⁸³. The reality was different, in fact NAACP leaders feared that the situation prospected by the teachers was highly probable, but they felt comfortable because they had never lost such a suit.

Anyway, between 1944 and 1945 the NAACP submitted two lawsuits the first in Charleston and the second in Columbia, which it both won.

The victory was not complete, it was decided that teachers would be paid on the basis of the grade they had received in their National Teacher's Examination (NTE). Such decision was seen as a white revenge within the black community.

In this situation Clark, in the following years, had asserted that while some black teachers decided to lay down their arms, others, categorically, refused to take the test. The NAACP encouraged black teacher to undertake the latter strategy, but Clark didn't agree as she stated that: « I will let you know right now that I'm going. I am not afraid to take that examination»⁸⁴.

At this point Clark was close to achieve her BA, so she was confident that she would have received a high score, and she did (she passed the test with an A and her salary tripled) together with 43% of African-American teachers. The remaining 57% ranked between grades C and D, which corresponded to the lower brackets of payment.

In 1947, Victoria Poinsette suffered a heart attack and Septima came back to live with her in Charleston where she continued her career as a teacher and became involved in various associations: she arranged parent- teacher group and worked

⁸³ Ivi, p. 156.

⁸⁴ Clark, S., *op. cit.*, p. 83.

with the Tuberculosis Association, and she worked in different position in the NAACP's Charleston branch.

3.5. Highlander Folk School

The Highlander Folk School⁸⁵ (HFS) was established in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee with the aim of educating workers in a desegregated environment.

Even though it was open for both blacks and whites, African-American workers started to participate to classes only in 1944. The problem was unions related. The majority of the workers who attended the six weeks intensive-studying program were members of the unions which funded the HFS's activities, and were not excited by the idea of multi-racial classes. In 1940 the School notified the unions that no one only- white class would be held. For four entire years worker's association didn't accepted this condition, until when the United Auto Workers (UAW) agreed to, and the first non- segregated program started. By the end of the 1940s some African- Americans became Highlander's board directors.

Up to 1952 desegregation, which was the biggest of all Southern problems, became the most important goal for the HFS. In summer 1953 two workshops, to which some southern black leaders participated, were organized.

Such sessions would have proven fundamental as the Citizenship Program project, which was later entrusted to the SCLC, arose from the meeting. In the same year, the Schwartzhaupt Foundation⁸⁶ gave to the HFS a three years subsidy, thing that for the first time permitted the School to work to improve adult education (they could finally teach to all the adults and not only to those enrolled in some unions). Clark was introduced to the Highlander project by the YWCA executive director of Charleston's Coming Street, Anna DeWees Kelly, who came back home as a different person thanks to the workshops «which “eliminated stereotypes” and “broke down the traditional barriers” in a manner that affirmed the nation's democratic principle»⁸⁷.

⁸⁵ Schneider, S. A., *“You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932-1961 (Studies in Rhetoric/Communication)”*, University of South Carolina Press, 2014, Kindle Edition.

⁸⁶ <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingsaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.SCHWARZHAUT>.

⁸⁷ Charron Mellen, K., *op. cit.*, pos. 4443.

When Clark participated to the 1954 June 27th- July 5th workshop, which focused on integration, she was genuinely pleased by the grade of integration within all the students, but most of all by their capacity to tighten personal connection in a small period of time. The Highlander environment allowed people to eat, sleep, and live their ordinary lives together which, meant that students started to bond with each other, and as far as black were concerned to trust whites. Clark was delighted when she understood that « [...] whites were against whites. The low income whites were considered dirt under the feet of wealthy whites, just like the black were [...] »⁸⁸. In this situation Clark had the proof that all her talks about racial integration weren't just utopian.

While participating to the workshops she became very fund of the ideals that they were helping spread, that is to say: develop future leaders (by giving people enough confidence to participate, to become active in their communities) equality, and the elimination of all type of stereotypes.

By the time she attended those classes she was an experienced teacher, with almost forty years of work on her back, who at the time was working for the Charleston Public School.

As soon as she got back to Charleston, Clark activism on behalf of the HFS had already started.

She recruited other activists to the Highlander cause, and organized under the aegis of the county parent- teacher association, a workshop on “home and family life, health, religion and music”, to which she invited Horton, HFS' co-founder, and his wife.

When she came back to Charleston from the workshop she was even more hardened: she engaged herself in a women and children's health campaign. She basically started to raise money in both Charleston and John Island (where sixty-eight people had died for the disease) in order to «provide diphtheria immunizations for local and African American children»⁸⁹.

Both Septima and Esau Jenkins, a member of the NAACP executive committee of Charleston, who was educating black citizens while riding his bus, were astonished by the behavior of the black population in the Island. They couldn't

⁸⁸ *Ivi*, pos. 4453.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, pos. 4525.

understand why the citizens, not even in the wake of all those death, could have never protested for the absence of a clinic.

On August 1954 Septima went back to HFS accompanied by Esau Jenkins.

Not long after the ending of the August seminar, Clark organized a meeting with Charleston's County black teachers' association and Horton. During this gathering one of the teachers stood up and brought to the attention of the entire audience one of the biggest problem of the black society, that is to say black vote. She argued that black citizens did not register to vote because they felt ashamed they couldn't write or read.

Horton was so intrigued by Clark activism that, on February 1955, he asked Clark to do a research on John Island, which was more a quest for new leaders.

While working in John Island Septima noticed that women were less socially active than men. Clark recalled that in a gathering that counted 250 people, the half of whom were women, none of them dared to ask any questions.

She decided that this situation had to change: first of all she tried and obtained their trust by looking after them (she brought clothes for their children, helped with their care); secondly she made them speak during meetings.

Astonished by the work Clark did in less than one year, Horton asked Clark to join his staff for the entire 1955 summer. She was thrilled by the proposal and immediately accepted it.

For the entire summer together with her work at Highlander she recruited students in John Island who were asked to participate to the new workshop dedicated to the United Nations, entitled "*The United Nation and You*"⁹⁰. This seminar, to which Clark had invited her cousin, Berenice Robinson, lasted two weeks and aimed to made the participants aware that an international organization would have been able to help them in their cause for the end of segregation. This workshop was ostracized by Jenkins whose concerns were toward the lack of blacks' ballot registration.

What is more interesting is that Rosa Parks⁹¹ was between those students. Clark remembered Parks as a quite shy woman that found the courage to speak in public only after she had a talk with Alice Poinsette. When Parks finally decided to take

⁹⁰ *Ivi*, pos. 4685.

⁹¹ See subchapter 2.3.2., p. 34.

a stand she hoped that no one in Montgomery knew she was there because she was scared by whites' people possible reactions, so when few months later Parks initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Highlanders were quite surprised. Clark recalled that « [...] she came. We sent money and gave her a scholarship. And when she went home, she had gained enough courage, enough strength to feel that she could stand firm and decide not to move when that man asked for her seat»⁹².

In the mid- 1950s the communist fear was spreading and the Highlander Folk School and all the other Civil Rights organizations were accused of being communists. When Clark was asked by Eugene Walker why Highlanders were considered communists, she answered that:

Because blacks and whites were able to live together and to work together at Highlander, the people of the South had a feeling— in fact, that came out in the McCarthy era—that if blacks and whites mixed, they're bound to have been communists. I had a wonderful experience in the Atlanta airport. A white woman came over to me and was talking about coming from Lake Junaluska. She was really one of the Methodist women that I knew. And another white woman was sitting to the end of the seat didn't know what we were talking about. As soon as this white woman left to go on her plane, she came over to me and said, "What is she talking to you about? Is she telling you about communism?" And I said, "Oh, no. We're church sisters, and we were talking about our churches."⁹³

Within all the measures Governor Timmerman undertook, the most significant one was the prohibition to all states employees to be enlisted with the NAACP. Clark who was committed to both the YWCA and the NAACP refused to give up her memberships. In order to protest the law she sent 726 letters to as many black teachers, of whom only 26 responded to her and only 11 agreed to meet with the superintendent of schools, and only five showed off their face. In the same year,

⁹² McFadden, G. J., "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights", in in *Women of the Civil Rights Movement: trailblazers and torchbearers, 1941-1965*, ed. by Crawford V. L., Rouse, Woods B., Carlson Publishing Inc., Brooklyn, New York, 1990, p. 91.

⁹³ Interview number G-0017 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill. p. 5;
http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/playback.html?base_file=G-0017&duration=01:26:08.

together with other ten NAACP members, she was fired, at fifty-eight, and loosed her state retirement benefits.

At this point, given her experience in the fields of civil rights and education, Myles Horton, hired her as a director of workshops.

When she joined permanently HFS the project, so dear to Jenkins, of educating people to register to vote, was becoming real and the three of them (Clark, Jenkins and Horton) spent the last months of 1956 organizing for the first John Island's Citizenship School.

3.5.1. The Citizenship Schools

In organizing the Citizenship School⁹⁴ both Horton and Jenkins thought of Clark as the best experienced teacher, but she was always on the move on the account of the HFS. Clark recommended Robinson. Robinson initially didn't wanted to accept the proposition because she didn't felt right for the job because she wasn't a college graduate. Finally she accepted the job when her cousin, Septima, remembered her that the students needed to learn the basics of school education.

The three organizers were convinced that Berenice was their best option because: she was a beautician and for that her wage was not tied to some racist white, and her work helped her develop « [...] the ability to listen to people»⁹⁵. Robinson was charged with the task to finding her students.

Classes would have started after the harvest and would have lasted for two months, more exactly two hours a night for two nights per week.

The first Citizenship class started on January 7th, 1957. The first thing Berenice did when her first students came into her class was to make them feel at home: « [...] I'm really not going to be your teacher. We're going to work together and teach each other»⁹⁶.

Following Highlander customs she asked her student what they wanted to learn before the start of each lesson. Adults wanted to be able to do every-day basics actions that is to say being able to: write their name and last name, read the Bible,

⁹⁴ Tusesen, S. C., "*Greater than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919-1965*", The University of North Carolina Press, 2013, Kindle Edition.

⁹⁵ Charron Mellen, K., *op. cit.*, pos. 5015

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, pos. 5032.

the newspapers or the letters they received from their estranged children, fill a check.

In Robinson class there were fourteen students of whom three could not read or write and eight who can barely read, so she started to teach to them letters and how to read them. The first satisfaction came when sixty-five years old Anna Vastine managed to write her entire name in the board.

To help Berenice with her work, Clark, who understood that in order to be active citizen people needed to be informed about their rights and duties, created a study book, which remembered the one she used at Gray's, containing all the subjects adult students wanted to know which included: the Constitution, the electoral laws, Highlander's history, fax-simile of the registration authorization, basics notions about the Republican and the Democratic parties, and the list of hospitals. The success of this new enterprise was proven by the fact that at the end of the first cycle of classes eight students out of fourteen registered to vote.

From that moment on, the number of people signing in to participate to Citizenship Schools increased, and by 1958 other three schools were opened (North Charleston, Edisto Island and Wadmalaw). At this point Clark and Horton decided that all classes should have been held by African-American teachers because they were afraid that the presence of whites tutors would have prevented students from learning as they were not acquainted to non- racist whites. It was also mandated that teachers should have participated to a training which basically was a five day seminar.

The achievements of the Citizenship Schools became very clear in John Island when, by 1958, almost 600 colored people had registered to vote. In the following two years John Island's Citizenship School put together four classes with a total 106 students, 86 of whom managed to receive the allowance to vote before the end of the sessions. In March 1960 it was estimated that John Island's black participation to the ballot had increase of 300 percent. It was then clear that all the tales about African- American lack of interest in the ballot were false. In the same years, the newly opened school in Edisto Island counted 111 enrolment and 200 new black voters.

As education usually gives people confidence, Clark was sure that the project would deeply affected colored people lives because, in her mind, they would have become more independent from whites' hegemony. Clark wasn't mistaken and African- American gradually started to become more autonomous, but she also noticed that both their level of instruction and autonomy were proportional to the drop of fear of the racist white society. This meant that the more they were educated the less they feared whites' behavior.

Septima was delighted when she understood that women, in John Island were changing their attitudes. It appeared to Clark that education had the ability to find those women's tongue so that they could speak their mind, and if in their previous meetings they didn't pronounce a sound, not even when they were dying with diphtheria, now they were asking things whether they wanted to learn or obtain something.

With the growing of the program whites' insecurities increased to the point that they did whatever they could to close it, they even got sixty-one years old Clark arrested while she was walking with her grand-daughter. With growing pressures on Horton he tried to save Citizenship Schools by taking distances from Clark – who had joined the SCLC during the 1958 *Crusade for Citizenship*⁹⁷, but it wasn't enough. In 1961 a Tennessean court obliged Highlander Folk School to definitely shut down Citizenship Schools under the threat of closing the entire HFS project.

3.5.2. The CEP

According to Clark, before closing the program the Highlander Folk School had received a \$250.000 grant by the Marshall Field Foundation in order to support its workshops. When it became clear that the Citizenship School would have been shut down, it was decided that the project would have been carried out by the SCLC. It was decided that the money had to be transferred to King's organization and that Clark, together with Andrew Young and Dorothy Cotton, who had joined Clark's venture on summer 1959, had to head the project. When they all went to

⁹⁷ See subchapter 4.5., p. 110.

the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program⁹⁸ (CEP) Clark and Cotton were, already, affiliate, while Young wasn't. The three of them were appointed with different tasks: Cotton, who worked as SCLC's director of the program, was charged with the direction of the center; Clark became director of teaching and Young coordinator of the teaching force. They spent the first year traveling together in order to find possible teachers to train, but they had an hard time because not only they were attacked by white racists, mainly the KKK, but they were also rejected by the black communities for their relation to the Highlander Folk and its alleged communism, and because they were afraid of local whites reactions.

Anyway they managed to train teachers and to give them back to their communities so that they could spread the knowledge. Clark, Cotton and Young search for teachers wasn't directed to College or high school graduates only, all they needed was someone who knew how to read and write because the entire program they had to follow once they had open a school for their locals was entirely mimeographed by Clark herself.

In CEP's workshop teacher were taught with simple concept, of which Clark gives a very clear example:

We used the election laws of that particular state to teach the reading. We used the amount of fertilizer and the amount of seeds to teach the arithmetic, how much they would pay for it and the like. We did some political work by having them to find out about the kind of government that they had in their particular community. And these were the things that we taught them when they went back home. Each state had to have its own particular reading, because each state had different requirements for the election laws.⁹⁹

The CEP soon became the most important project the SCLC had ever undertaken. From 1961 to 1962 Clark, Cotton and Young worked with 291 future teachers,

⁹⁸ Cotton, D. and Young, A., *"If Your Back's Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement"*, Atria Books, 2012 Kindle Edition.

⁹⁹ Interview number G-0017 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill, p. 7;
http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/playback.html?base_file=G-0017&duration=01:26:08.

who opened 263 classes for a total of 2.330 students. From 1962 to 1963 those numbers increased: 395 teachers were trained, they started 366 schools and the number of people enrolled in the classes raised up to 5.623. By 1964 the CEP had spread in the entire South with a total of 897 schools in which 25.000 students were taught by 1.600 teachers. In the same year 50.000 African- American registered for vote, proclaiming the CEP as the most successful enterprise between all the SCLC's projects.

Even though her project was succeeding Clark wasn't enthusiastic of the SCLC's behavior toward women and male leadership.

Women, for instance, represented a consistent part of the CEP's students and teachers, not to mention the fifteen working to coordinate the entire SCLC machine, but never managed to achieve leadership positions. As they put their lives in danger and were deeply committed to the freedom cause, these women were recognized by their local communities as leaders while the central administration didn't. Clark often complained about how Rosa Parks was treated by both men in the Movement and the media arguing that:

[...] not even Rosa Parks was accorded her rightful place [...]. We talked about it, she and I. She gave Dr. King the right to practice non-violence. Because by refusing to get up out of that seat was the real fact that he would organize the boycott and work with people all through. And it went into many countries. [...] And it was Rosa Parks who started the whole thing.¹⁰⁰

Clark was a victim herself of such sexist organization. When she moved from HFS to SCLC Andrew Young was charged with the administration of grants, even though he said he didn't know how the program operated. This position should have been entrusted to Clark as she perfectly knew how to operate in a system she developed. Young probably realized that the seat he was occupying was Clark's so he asked her to train him and never acted like a boss to her. In spite of Young's gentle behavior the difference between the two were underlined by the differences in their salaries: if in 1961 Young's wage exceeded Clark's of \$12.000, in 1962

¹⁰⁰ McFadden, G. J., "*Oral Recollection of Septima Poinsette Clark*", Columbia, USC Instructional Services Center, 1980.

after a significant raise of both their pays, Young was still earning \$17.000 per year more than Clark.

Such differences in payments were bothering Clark, who taught that, sooner or later, women would have left the project. This situation was worsened by the fact that salaries weren't paid regularly. Clark felt miserable for this situation because she thought that if activists weren't treated seriously, the movement wouldn't last long. Basically they were sabotaging themselves. Clark's disappointment grew bigger when female teachers started calling her saying that they hadn't been paid and that they needed the money to buy Christmas presents. As soon as she received those calls she questioned Young about the situation and the answer she received was that he had paid the men.

Septima grew very uncomfortable with Black Ministers idea of leadership. Clark, like Baker (with whom she worked several time in the HFS, in the CEP, the SNCC, and during the Crusade for Citizenship), had spent her entire activist carrier in developing local leadership believing in the bottom-up participation. Not long after her entrance in the SCLC she realized that local people were used « as the “political arm” of the black church and reflected its top-down structure [...] »¹⁰¹.

They placed their leadership on their charisma that is to say in the ability to moving masses with their rhetoric, and only few of them were willing to share their leadership. Clark was convinced that their egos were dividing the movement because they didn't share their leadership with new and young local people and at the same time they weren't able to work with low income classes, as in the case of Young, to whom Clark had to teach how to behave with people from lower classes. Septima Clark had focus in teaching to the lower classes, so that they could speak for themselves, she often said that «I always felt that if you were going to develop other people, you don't talk for them. You train them to do their own talking»¹⁰². In order to change this situation Clark tried to convince King to allow local activists to occupy leadership positions but the majority of the men closed to him despised the proposal because in their opinion no one else could have ever achieved what King did. In another occasion, King was reading to a SCLC audience a letter wrote by Clark in which she hoped for a more democratic

¹⁰¹ Charron Mellen, K., *op. cit.*, pos. 6155.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, pos. 6267.

leadership, all the men started laughing. In that moment Septima realized that even though women were essential for the SCLC, their opinion was not needed. The campaign was without any doubt one of the SCLC's greatest success, but they failed to listen to part of the Movement, women, and this was Clark's biggest regret.

Chapter 4: Ella Josephine Baker

*“My theory is, strong people don’t
need strong leaders”*



4.1. Tales of slavery

Ella Josephine Baker is considered one of the biggest female leadership-less leaders of the entire Civil Rights Movement. Even though she occupied some important positions within some of the most powerful Civil Rights Organizations such as the NAACP, the SCLC, and the SNCC which wouldn't exist without her, she never managed to see her rightful place (the one of leader) recognized.

She was born on December the 13th, 1903 to Anna (born Ross) and Blake Baker in Norfolk, Virginia but soon moved to Littleton, North Carolina where her maternal grandparents lived.

Her Civil Activism probably found its basis in the years spent with her grandparents, especially in the figure of Mitchell Ross who managed to instill on a young Ella a deep sense of community and social responsibility.

Both her paternal and maternal grandparents were slaves in Warren County, North Carolina and even though she didn't know much of her father's side of the family¹⁰³ she developed a very strict relationship with her mother's side.

It's in this slave's condition described by her grandfather's recounts of the time that Baker developed her activism.

According to Mitchell Ross, Warren County's economy was based on the cultivation of corn, tobacco, cotton and wood. Unlike in the other Southern States and in the entire North Carolina, Warren County's farms were smaller, there were only few bigger plantations, which meant that the number of slaves deployed was never high (less than twenty people) and that their trade was highly unusual. In this situation Black's families suffered less divisions and managed to develop relationships with slaves from other farms, developing a sense of community themselves. Slave's owners were of course for the majority ruthless toward blacks. By 1830, the few who treated them (the slaves) with some kind of human dignity, and had managed to teach to their sharecroppers how to read and write were prohibited to do so by the North Carolinian disposition, which declared the lawlessness of educating slaves to read and write. Things got even worse the next year when Nat Turner¹⁰⁴ guided a terrifying slave's rebellion in Virginia, and the North Carolinians reacted by tightening Black regulations.

¹⁰³ According to Baker she knew little about her paternal grandparents except for the fact that they both were before she can remember of him. On the other hand, Grandma Margaret had a lot of Caucasians in her blood.

¹⁰⁴ Allmendinger, Jr., David F., *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2014, Kindle Edition; Hermary- Vieille, C., Orr Brodtkin R., *Nat Turner tragic search for freedom: from Deprivation to Vengeance*, Trafford Publishing, 2002, Kindle Edition.

Nat Turner was a slave born in 1800 in Southampton, Virginia. His entire life consisted in the usual slave's life: he had small freedom, he couldn't marry unless his master wanted to, he couldn't own a house or any other kind of property, he could not save/ gain money, and worst of everything he was sold multiple times which means that he had to live his family and friends and never see them again. By the 1820s he was considered by other slaves as their spiritual and became convinced that their only way for them (slaves) to achieve their freedom and with that their civil rights was to demolish the white slave's system with the use of force. This idea of his became reality on August 22nd, 1831 when Turner and other six slaves from the same plantation started what is recalled to be the greatest slaves' uprising that ever happened in the entire American history. After killing his master and his entire family they moved to other plantation murdering all whites, men, women and children, they found during the way. It didn't matter if they were masters or just poor people. It didn't matter if they were masters or just poor people, they were killed just because of their complexion. To the twenty-four hours rebellion almost sixty slaves from other plantations joined Turner's and together killed more than fifty-five people. Their aim was to devastate the town of Jerusalem and murder all its citizens. They were ultimately stopped by the Governor's militia. Some rebels were immediately killed or incarcerated while

Slaves were in general prevented from gathering as they had no time for social relations, but, anyway, managed to create some networks by sharing resources, such as food and clothing, which, according to Baker set the basis for the creation of a common sense of mutual assistance that became fundamental for the development of the Civil Rights Movement.

Baker's maternal grandparents, with their counts of war, were fundamental in her understanding of the slave system.

Her grandmother, Josephine Elizabeth Ross, known as Bet was mainly Caucasian. According to her accounts she was daughter to the white master of the plantation and of an octoroon¹⁰⁵ slave with more white ancestors than blacks (sixteen white ancestors) but was born a slave, as her mother was black. Legends narrate that Bet's mother was killed by the mistress of the house who poisoned her Christmas dinner right after she gave birth to her daughter who ended up being raised by her grandmother. Her light complexion made her a house girl¹⁰⁶. While working in the house, the mistress (who killed her mother) decided¹⁰⁷ that she was to marry a carriage boy named Carter, but Bet was in love with a very dark skinned slave whose name was Mitchell. When she refused to accomplish such an order, the mistress (whose name is unknown) ordered her husband to flog her, thing he couldn't do as he was her father. Rather, he decided to send her to plow in the fields next to the river, job that was traditionally reserved to men. For the entire period of the punishment she used to work very hardly and participated to all the social occasions in order to let them see they didn't managed to break her. This was her own way of protesting. As Baker put it « [...] she would plow all day, and if

waiting for the trial that would have without any doubt sentenced them to death; others escaped in the woods but were soon found and ended up like the latter. The only survivor was Nat Turner who after two month of hiding in the wood was ultimately recovered and sentenced to be hanged. As a result the militia started to terrifying African- Americans by randomly kill people and blacks' freedom got even smaller.

¹⁰⁵ This term was firstly used in colonial times to refer to partially black people more specifically to slaves with only one black great-grandparent in their entire family tree.

¹⁰⁶ Whiter black slaves were employed in the house as their skin color made them more "human" than the darker, and for that entrusted with the care of the master's house. If women, in this context, were referred as house girls, men called carriage boys/ men.

¹⁰⁷ Masters had the right to decide over slaves' life: they could kill, buy, sell them whenever they wanted because slaves belonged to them, they were part of their property. Within master's rights there was also their ability to arrange marriage within slaves.

necessary, dance all night to show that her spirit was not broken. This was a form of resistance [...] »¹⁰⁸.

Her biggest form of defiance was getting married, against her master's will, with Mitchell while she was still a slave. Mitchell Ross was known as an indefatigable worker and a self-contented man, to the point that, right after the 1865 emancipation, together with Bet and some other relatives he managed to buy a part (if not the entire) of the plantation -where he and its family were enslaved- and some other fields and turned them into their homes. They cultivated corn, cotton, and wheat, and took care of multiple farm animals. What the Rosses achieved was quite unusual for the majority of the newly freed men without any kind of school education (they didn't know how to write and read): they were able to create a self-sufficient environment, thanks to which they survived to whites' domination and discriminations of the following years.

They managed to donate a part of their property needed for the erection of the Roanoke Chapel Baptist Church which would have also become the house of an African American School. The construction of such African American school was very important because right after slaves' emancipation it became fundamental to learn how to read and write because as an ex-slave in Mississippi affirmed « [...] I consider education the next best thing to liberty [...] »¹⁰⁹.

Such lust for education helped strengthening the already strong feeling of community within the Blacks, as people joined forces in order to get their children to school: those who had the lands, as Mitchell Ross did, built schools or gave the land up to the community so that they could raise school building and those, mainly women, who were educated became teachers.

This need for learning might be seen from another perspective: Southern racist whites knew, for the majority, how to read and write whether they went to school or not, while Blacks couldn't. For the entire period of the Reconstruction¹¹⁰ (and on), whites continued to consider Blacks as inferior, almost non- human people,

¹⁰⁸ Moyer, J.T., "*Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement*", Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, Kindle Edition. Pos. 270.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, pos. 315.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, C. R. et al., editors. "Reconstruction." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 3: History*, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp.219-223, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616551_wilson.50.

and following this path it is possible that Blacks hoped that education would have convinced whites that they all had the same capabilities and possibilities, so that violence and racism toward them would have finally come to an end, but this wasn't the case.

Such tales of slavery would have proven fundamental for Baker's entire career, as in her speeches she used to connect the Civil Rights Movement to the Freedom Movement. By doing so she managed to create a deep feeling of belonging.

4.1.2 Ella's parents

According to Moye and Ransby¹¹¹, Bet and Mitchell Ross had at least twelve children and one of them was Ella's mother, Anna Georgianna. It is highly possible that Anna Ross grew up with a lot of expectation as the period of the Reconstruction instilled hope for a social improvement within the Black part of the American society. She attended the Warrenton's New England Missionaries school, a school specifically oriented in educating the children of the newly ex-slaves, where she met her future husband, Blake Baker, who was himself son of freedmen who were not as wealthy as the Rosses, but for that not less enterprising. Once finished school both Ella's parents started working, and while Anna stayed in Warren County and became a school teacher, as it was appropriate in those years, Blake moved to Norfolk, Virginia, where thanks to its proximity to the ocean, labor force was highly requested.

They married in 1896 and Anna moved to Norfolk where she went through some difficult time. Her husband was often absent from home, as he was working on a steamship which sailed from Norfolk to Washington D. C., and, nonetheless, she had to stop teaching as working wasn't suited for a married woman (see chapter 1) with the result that she spent the majority of her time by herself. The loneliness she felt during Blake's trips to D.C. was emphasized by the social environment they lived in: Norfolk was nothing like Littleton, for the first time she became acquainted with racism.

¹¹¹ Ransby B., *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 2003, Kindle Edition.

By the time Blake and Anna got married and moved to Norfolk the almost utopian era of the Reconstruction had expired: following the decision taken by the Supreme Court in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson*¹¹² action, in which it basically declared that some southern laws which precluded blacks to enter public services with equal rights as those of the whites were constitutional, Jim Crow Laws became the Southern order. Living in such segregated and racist society would not be easy for a young African-American whose hopes for a just, equal and racist-free democracy had faded with the tragic end of the Reconstruction Era.

If Anna's public life wasn't easy, the personal one was even more difficult. It is estimated by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that in the early XX century, one in ten (in some areas this awful probability rose to one in three) newborn passed away in very tender age. Anna had at least eight pregnancy from which, only other two children, Ella excluded, survived: Blake Curtis (1901) and Maggie (Margaret Odessa- 1908). The other gestation ended up in spontaneous abortion or in deaths at birth. Ella herself remembered the burial of her younger brother, Prince, around 1906. As she recalled her mother was too exhausted to attend the function, so she went with her father who didn't allowed her to get off of the vehicle. The Bakers adopted Martha Grinage, daughter to one of Anna's first cousins, with whom Ella developed a very special bond.

By the time Ella was seven, Anna decided that the visits to the maternal grandparents in Littleton would have turned permanent. The *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision ended up strengthening Jim Crow laws, and so segregation. Even though both the Supreme Court's decision and Jim Crow laws should have been considered unconstitutional, and for that reason non applicable as they were completely in opposition to the XIII and XIV amendments. From 1901 to 1910 Black electorate had fallen from 1.826 to 44 and "Whites Only" writings started to appear everywhere. This situation was the same in every Southern States to the point that when a Black boxer, Jack Johnson, defeated the white James J. Jeffries, in what is remembered as the "Battle of the Century"¹¹³, in Reno, Nevada the

¹¹² Hull Hoffer, W. J., *"Plessy vs. Ferguson: Race and Inequality in Jim Crow America"*, University Press of Kansas, 2016, Kindle edition; Medley, K., *"We as freemen. Plessy vs. Ferguson"*, Pelican Publishing, 2003, Kindle edition.

¹¹³<http://www.thefightcity.com/july-4-1910-johnson-vs-jeffries-jack-johnson-james-jeffries-corbett-sullivan-tommy-burns-fight-of-the-century/>.

majority, if not all, of the Southern States where shaken by anti- black riots. Norfolk wasn't obviously spared and the riot ended up by causing forty injured and almost two hundred were incarcerated.

It is probably after these events that Anna decided to move her family in a safer environment, as Littleton was.

4.1.3. When in Littleton

In Littleton things were completely different: the majority of the population was Black so African-American weren't discriminated as much as those living in bigger centers. Littleton was considered a Black community where the general store was run by a Black citizen, Mr. Foreman. It wasn't obviously a rich community because the majority of its inhabitants were dependent to some white employers, but this wasn't the Rosses' case.

Ella was greatly influenced by her grand-parents figures: Bet's tales of slavery would have become essential for her life as an activists because in every speech she gave she used to recall one of them; while Mitchell who, according to Baker, considered Ella as his favored grandchild- probably because of their resemblance as they were dark skinned, thundering voice tone, and had both a quite proud behavior- used to spend a lot of time with her talking about some of the major issue of the time. Mitchell and Ella were so close that they didn't separate even when her grandfather was preaching his sermon- which all contained an ethical ending- at his Roanoke Baptist Church.

Ella's grand-parents are probably the ones who instilled on her a deep sense of community. In fact, as stated by Ransby both Mitchell and Bet didn't conceive their farm as a private resource, but better as a supply source for the entire village as they were used to redistribute the products in exuberance to their neighbors. Sometime, things went beyond the "sharing" when they actually mortgage their family's possessions in order to advance the money for some of their fellow citizens in need. As recalled by Baker herself during an interview with Ransby, the town of Littleton might have been compared to a well- oiled collective farm in

which everyone donated part of their time (work-force) in order to help another farmer and then move to the next homestead:

« [...] They were independent farmers, but they also went in for the practice of cooperative [...] Helping each other. When I came along, for instance, I don't think there was but one threshing machine for threshing the wheat. And so today they might be on Grandpa's place, and all the people who had wheat who needed the thresher would be there, or at least some from those families. And then they would move around. [...]»¹¹⁴.

In Littleton, the Baptist Church, led by Mitchell Ross was the rule. To a certain extent it is arguable that, in a small scale, the system of cooperation within Littleton's Black community, had the same characteristics the Civil Rights Movement would have developed. The Baptist Church and its Minister were considered the town organizers, the developers of some sort of a "social commonwealth" in which citizens helped each other in order to survive. Nothing happened if the Minister didn't wanted to. As the Church was such an important subject, people were particularly religious as the majority of activists of the Civil Rights. Ella herself was baptized at the age on nine, and as she recalled she wanted to be accepted by the community, and not be "left out"- as she feared- for not receiving her christening. This event had a profound psychological effect on the future activist as she felt that her irascibility should be oppressed by favoring a more self-disciplined behavior, as she thought she needed to demonstrate she deserved receiving the sacrament. Religion did become a trustful companion for both her public and private entire lives. She did questioned over God's existence, its representatives on earth, and its devotees but it appeared that her faith was placed in what her grandfather and the small community of Littleton taught her: respect for every human being and cooperation.

If her grand-parents managed to instill on her a deep sense of community, it was her mother, Anna, who introduced her to activism. Anna Ross Baker was the real prototype of a woman activist of the 1950s and 1960s. The entire Ross family was driven by the belief that their actions were the result of Jesus' will, but Anna had a

¹¹⁴ Moye, J. T., *op. cit.*, pos. 424.

different behavior: she was a leader. To the majority of people living in our age the role occupied by Anna might be considered within the lowest, but in reality the effort women like her did helped the cause of women rights. Of course she occupied the role which better suited a married woman, daughter to a Baptist Minister but she did it with extreme passion.

Ella recalled her mother organizing Littleton's women in their living room under the protective wings of the Baptist Church. Her role was clearly determined by the typical social structure of the time which did not allowed women to occupy relevant position, but this didn't prevented her from becoming a role model, someone to trust and lean on for the entire community. She influenced statewide gatherings of the Women's Baptist Convention in which she made her daughter, Ella, took the stage and pronounced some short speech or repeated a passage of the Holy Bible. Those very speeches would have proven fundamental for the development of Baker's future skills in public talks. The women she encountered in those meetings inspired her as they were tough, dedicated and bold as her mother was. In those assemblies women showed all the power they had as they were entrusted with the management of some finances which were dependent to their programs. Raising money, for helping missionaries abroad and to support Black school in the Country, was one of the main activities. As Ella recalled, as far as Anna was concerned her favorite initiatives concerned the care of aged and ill people, and orphaned, not because the Church told her so but because she seemed to firmly believe that such kind of philanthropic actions would have brake some mental barrier, like those of class differences which would ended up in the strengthening of the entire Black community. To understand better Anna's work it would be useful to recall an anecdote, which partially explains her doings: in Littleton there was a little girl called Mandy Bunk whose parents were mentally ill¹¹⁵ and weren't able to look after her properly. As such people were rejected by the society, Mandy, being their daughter was stigmatized too. One day on her way back home, Ella met the young girl bleeding, in which it appeared to be her first

¹¹⁵ Both Ransby and Moye do not clarify what they means with the word "mentally ill". They might have being suffering for a mental retardation or for a mental disturbance. One thing is certain: Governments of the time, especially in the deep South, did not took care of such people who were abandoned and left to the cares of some charity organization (when there was one).

period, so she rushed home to her mother who run immediately to the little girl and took care of her.

Anna Ross Baker was ultimately able to make every class barrier fall down, at least in Littleton, as different people at every hour of the day use to knock at her door seeking for some help.

Ella admired her mother's behavior, and as much as they shared some main characteristics such as the roughness and smartness, Ella was way less lady-like than her mother was. When at school she deeply loved to play baseball to the point when her mother decided that it was time for her to become a decent woman and obliged her to take care of the Powell children after their mother death. Anna was sure that taking care of the Powell's household and children, even for once a week, would have turned her daughter from a tomboy to a young decent lady in accordance to the standards of the time.

4.1.4. The schooling years

The Baker siblings attended an African- American free public school in Littleton where Ella was allowed to attend advanced classes, because Anna had already told her how to read and write.

In those times, North Carolina contributed to Blacks' education only until the eighth grade, so the families who wanted their children to have a higher education had to pay for some private school. That's what the Bakers did.

The absence of public schools (for Black people) was a very precise strategy undertook by Southern Governments. As education means progress and knowledge, which has a lot to do with self- confidence and pride, the creation of a class of schooled Blacks people would have dramatically endangered (as it later did) the racist Southern system. In order to overcome such a fail of the State, Black colleges entrusted themselves with African- American high school education.

Ella was firstly enrolled at Monroe High School but the educators didn't met Anna's expectation, so in the school year 1918-1919 she was transferred to Shaw

Academy, in Raleigh, which was linked to one of the most famous Black University: Shaw.

Shaw was inspired by Booker T. Washington¹¹⁶ and his Tuskegee Institute¹¹⁷. Unlike Tuskegee, Shaw did not prepare students to become labor workers but gave them what was considered a classical education where the teaching of English literature and chemistry were at the order of the day. Both Tuskegee and Shaw did prepared women to become teachers and Anna thought that Shaw was the best institute to train her daughter to become an expert in such profession, as it was suited for a decent unmarried young woman. Path that Ella had no intention to follow, she studied mathematics, Latin, English, French, home economics, science and of course the Holy Bible. In 1923 she was entrusted with the farewell speech of her class as she graduated valedictorian, and started Shaw University in the fall.

In Shaw, Baker was mentally close to two Professors: Benjamin J. Brawley and Walter S. Turner. The first, an intellectual poet, was quite a prudish man who didn't attended any basketball game as he was convinced that the contestants' outfits were too disclosing, but Ella was attracted by their same desire to overcome social injustices and human's self-constructed inequalities. The latter was a sociology professor whose main educational goal was to expand his student's critical ability. Ella remembered that on one day he wanted the class to discuss the notion of "good hair"¹¹⁸. He argued that « [...] Everybody's got good hair. [...] All hair is good. It covers your head. [...]»¹¹⁹. Ella's hairstyle, as the one of the other female students in the class, was exactly the same whites women had, and for the first time in her entire life she started thinking that she might have grown following the standard imposed by the dominant, and racist white society. At Shaw, Baker was a very active student: thanks to the powerful and deep voice, she inherited from her grandfather, she became one of the best debaters of the

¹¹⁶ Smock, R. W., *"Booker T. Washington: Black leadership in the age of Jim Crow"*, Ivan R. Dee, 2006, Kindle Edition.

¹¹⁷ http://www.tuskegee.edu/about_us/history_and_mission.aspx.

¹¹⁸ African- American women used to waste a lot of money in the care of their hair. They thought that by straightening their mane white's population would have had less difficulties on accepting them as they hopes that the assembling would have ease white's racist behavior. This obviously wasn't the case (see subchapter 2.1.).

¹¹⁹ Moye, J.T., *op. cit.*, pos. 556.

school; she collaborated with the faculty newspaper; became an activist for the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA)¹²⁰ an organization (backed by the Baptists Church) whose aim was to collect funds for students in need. In addition to all this activities Baker found the time to work two jobs in order to help her parents with her schooling fees. She again graduated valedictorian in 1927.

The nine years Ella spent in Shaw were proven fundamental for the development of her thinking: being a debater and a journalist wasn't exactly appropriate for women. Doing her job she encountered a lot of opposition from her male companions but she didn't pay attention to them as she had come to the conclusion that she was no inferior to them and for that able to do the exact same things they did.

The results she achieved were indeed fundamental, but the most important lesson she learnt while in Shaw was that both black and white could cooperate in order to reach their goals. At Shaw even though the dean was of white complexion, teachers were mixed and by seeing them relating to each other and working together she became convinced that their interaction resulted in developing their best abilities.

4.2. The Harlem Renaissance

Ella couldn't attend graduated school as her parents economic conditions didn't allow her to. Anna would have loved her daughter to become a teacher, profession that Ella rejected for her entire life for three main reasons: first of all she taught that women, and especially Black women, were regarded with minor appreciation compared to their male colleagues, a practice which originated from the white's organization of the society that forced women to asks some white men if they could or could not teach « [...] you couldn't teach unless somebody in the white hierarchy okayed your teaching [...]»¹²¹; second she would have never contradict her ideals, as the majority of teachers did in order to keep their jobs; and third it was the job that everyone had always assumed she would have ended up doing.

¹²⁰ <http://www.worldywca.org/>.

¹²¹ Moye, J. T., *op. cit.*, pos. 593.

Even though Anna's expectation to see her daughter becoming a teacher were, at least at first sight disregarded, Ella ended up becoming one on the greatest educator of the entire Civil Rights Movement.

After graduation she left North Carolina and moved to New York where her sister Martha was already living.

In New York Ella realized that its streets could have given her better learning chances than any of the university she once wanted to apply to. She was charmed by all the talks about communism, capitalism, black- nationalism and other issues people were analyzing in what might have resembled to public lesson. Baker was especially amazed by the power of breaking social barriers those street classes had which included Black and white people, rich and poor, pro-communist and anti-communist and so on. One day while walking in a park she met a group of Jewish newcomers from the USSR who were talking about the consequences of communism in their country. Even though she had no intention on lining up with one or the other front (pro- against- communism) she was quite interested on hearing both parties. One of those men had a particular sympathy for the young African-American and they spent a lot of time talking about the issue. Thanks to that conversation Ella understood that someone could endorse an idea but disapproved the results of its application: « [...] he wasn't too keen about the soviet [...]. He was basically approving of the concept, but highly critical of the implementation of the concept as far as the Russian revolution was concerned [...]. »¹²²

In the years between the two World Wars, Harlem had become the major springboard for the Black culture. This period is better referred as the Harlem Renaissance¹²³.

It all started right after the end of the First World War in conjunction with New York's economic growth. In that period the city faced a significant Black's migration from the Southern rural states, West Africa, and the Caribbean and the majority of such immigrants settled in the Harlem neighborhood where in the 1930 U.S. census estimated that the 55 percent of the population was Black. Such differentiated cultures which had find themselves coexisting together helped the

¹²² Ivi, pos. 684.

¹²³ Wall, C. A., "*The Harlem Renaissance: a very short introduction*", Oxford University Press, 2016, Kindle Edition.

development of such cultural awakening, the Harlem Renaissance is. The movement took this name in virtue of its resemblances to the Italian Renaissance (XIV- XVI) that is to say a period in which, starting from Florence (Tuscany) the Italian peninsula (followed by other European States) faced some profound development in the fields of arts and culture.

During the Harlem Renaissance modelers, lyricists, singers, writers and many other artists moved in the neighborhood where some wealthy Blacks had founded some new enterprises. The presence of such quantity of Black artists led African-American towards the creation of a public personality that is to say to a new set of behavioral rules, the “New Negro” type as the Black philosopher Alain Locke¹²⁴ referred to. Following the “New Negro” philosophy, Blacks had to be able to defeat all whites’ expectations which met that: if whites expected Blacks to be idle, uneducated and vulnerable they, instead, had to show themselves as energetic, educated and confident. It might be said that such kind of philosophy was embraced by Black activist of the Civil Rights Movement when they became convinced that by emulating whites social conducts they would have had less opposition on accepting them as a full titled citizen (see subchapter 2.1.).

One of the theme, which were *à la mode*, regarded Blacks’ inclusion into the American society. Should they work in order to obtain full integration within the already present society and institutions, or should they fight for the creation of a new Black State? Up until the 1929 Stock Market Crash, Baker had always shared the first vision and, in order to prepare herself for the streets’ debates and make her case, she started to study the subject in a more profound way. From 1929 to 1932 the average wages of the majority of Harlemites dropped by 44% while joblessness rose three times higher. This situation convinced Baker that the system they were part of might have been at the basis of the dramatic situation. She started reconsidering Marx’s ideology and soon became a Marxian student: « A social order can be break down, and the individual is the victim of the break down, rather than the cause of it. [...] I began to see that there were certain social forces over

¹²⁴ Locke, A., “*The New Negro: An Interpretation*”, Martino Fine Books, Eastford, 2015.

which the individual had very little control. [...] it was out of that concept that I began to explore more in the area of ideology and the theory regarding social change»¹²⁵.

From this moment on Baker had always be recognized as a communist idealist who adapted some of Marx's principles « [...] from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs [...] » to cooperative egalitarianism which, in her case, finds its way back to his grandfather farm in Littleton.

4.2.1. First steps into activism

When Ella arrived in New York she worked firstly as a waitress in a New Jersey resort and secondly as a maid in Worchester County.

With her approaching to the socialist ideals and the connections she made during the public debates in Harlem, she began working as a journalist for the American West Indian News, for the Negro National News, for the Norfolk Journal and Guide, and for the Negro National News.

While working at the Negro National News she met George Schuyler who in 1930 had founded the Young Negroes Cooperative League (YNCL) with the purpose of giving to young graduates, between the age of eighteen and thirty, a job consistent with their studies. Baker entered the League as one of the charter members and by 1931 she became YNCL's national director. Baker and Schuyler organized the YNCL with the only purpose of « [...] gain economic power through consumer cooperation [...] »¹²⁶ in a period of deep economic crisis as the Great Depression¹²⁷ was. The aim of the project was to create cooperatives businesses (businesses affiliate to YNCL) whose cooperation would have led to the reduction of the price of living, of services and of primary goods; cuts which would have led to an empowerment of the Black purchaser.

They also organized learning groups with the aim to help member's businesses to face economic problems. Women participated as equals in all the organization's sectors.

¹²⁵ Moyer, J.T., *op. cit.*, pos. 699.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, pos. 722.

¹²⁷ Bernanke B. S., *Nonmonetary Effects of the Financial Crisis in the Propagation of the Great Depression*, «The American Economic Review», June 1983, vol. 73 n. 3, pp. 257-276.

By 1932 Baker started to travel in order to promote the YNCL goals and find new associates. During those journeys she wanted to « [...] awaken the Negro consumer to the enormous power that he is as a consumer; and it will act as an antidote to some of that hopelessness with which the inarticulate masses of Black Americans face the question, “After the Depression, what?”[...]»¹²⁸.

In such situations Ella founded out what her goal in life was, that is to say education.

Once she arrived in those new communities she did not only made some speech about the new opportunities they would have had after joining the Organization, but she used to organized, with the help of the local church small group’s assemblies in which she helped them analyzing the situation, stressing from their own knowledge. Educating was such an important task for Ella because she was deeply convinced that education was the primary base for the development of the ability to well organize a community which is in direct connection with the development of a well-oiled democratic system. Baker’s participation to this project was essential for her personal growth as she worked with people of different individuals from different social classes.

Between 1931 and 1932 fellowships increased twofold. The project was an ambitious one, and even though some cooperatives did turned into a fortunate venture, as the Harlem Own Cooperative, Inc., was, the majority of the investments turned into failure mainly because of the market crash, they being Blacks, and for their inexperience due to their young age.

Even though such experience might be considered by the most as a failure, this wasn’t Ella’s case, as she saw it as a chance to teach and coordinate Black crowds. In other words she appreciated anything that would have improved Black’s schooling, organizational skills and democracy. Such experience would have redefined all her future relations with others Civil Rights Organization. The YNCL was not a gendered organization which means that men and women had the same rights and equal possibilities to occupy relevant positions within its structure, which wasn’t the case within other organization such as the NAACP that Baker would eventually leave due to such discrimination.

¹²⁸ Moyer, J. T., *op. cit.*, pos. 734-735.

Another essential experience she had was at the first Negro History Club based in the 135th Street Library, which she founded (around the end of the 1920's) together with librarian Ernestine Rose¹²⁹. In 1933 she entered the Adult Education Committee's office. The main aim of this Club was to promote debates about present happenings and historical events. Baker loved to debate about current events as she was interested in what was happening in Harlem's streets. Baker was interested in people and their feelings, because only by listening others, improvements were possible.

The library program increased in conjunction with the 1929 Stock Market Crash when a lot of Harlemites loosed their job. The absence of jobs had as a direct consequence the increase of poverty (which around 1932 increased at almost the 50%) between all the African- American social classes. Even though she only had a part- time wage, Baker worked more than forty hours a week teaching economics bases to African- Americans. She was certain that knowing some economics they would have become more prudent consumers. Ella also created the Young Forum, a course, dedicated to young men and women in which they were asked to analyze the happening of the day in order to find a solution. It was important, for Baker, that all the young people participating to those classes were active, which means that Ella didn't considered worthy to participate and just listen to what she had to say; she, instead, wanted them to talk their minds out, to share their opinions so that they would developed a critical perspective of the most important issues of the moment.

Along with such classes she also founded the time to lecture the Mother in the Parks group. It's not actually clear how an unmarried, childless woman on her thirties was able to lesson a group of mothers meeting in Colonial and St. Nicholas Parks. We don't even know exactly what those speeches were about but they would have probably regarded the school system's situation and all the other major topics. One thing is sure she attended all the groups she felt were in need of education, because she was deeply convinced that only by educating all social

¹²⁹ Not to be confused with Ernestine Louise Rose (born Polowsky), 1810-1892. She was an abolitionists, civil rights activists, and suffragette.

classes from the lowest to the highest, they would have been able to exit such second level citizenship situation.

By 1936 the Club was shut down due to the economic crisis and Baker thanks to her friendship with Lester Granger, who at the time was the secretary of the Committee on Negro Welfare for the Welfare Council of New York City, began working for the Workers' Education Project (WEP), a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)¹³⁰.

At thirty-two years old Baker obtained, for the first time in her entire life a fixed wage. The WPA was one of the only, if not the only public agency that enlisted a lot of women and the absolute first to employ Blacks giving them equal work opportunities as those of the whites. Baker immediately felt suitable for the job as her goals and those of the WPA lined up, that is to say fighting unemployment throughout education. Teachers and organizers, such as Ella Baker, were trained by the WEP to be adult educators and then matched with community groups. An average WEP teacher would teach almost every class from elementary economics to art, to American history to science. Students came from different backgrounds: there was the high skilled worker who had lost his job as a consequence of the economic crisis, the young unskilled boys and girls from the neighborhood, the housewife, old men and women and so on. By 1937 Baker began monitoring her fellow instructors in the CED, which was the WEP'S Consumer Education Division, which had the task to coordinate classes such as consumer's problems and consumer education. While in charge she organized the CED classes in debates, like she did during her time at the public library, because she was deeply convinced that the only way to learn was by talking with other people and those talks she promoted would have, in second place, make them realize how much power they were in possession as a collectivity, which was one of the main goals of the division she ruled.

By 1938 the Federal Government, under the attack of an anti-New Deal bloc created by a group of representatives of both the parties, was forced to cut down some of its projects, or at least some of those project's branches. As far as the

¹³⁰ Created by Presidential act in May 1935. It was the result of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's (1933-1945) Second New Deal which lasted from 1935 to 1938.

WPA was concerned one of the first departments to be cut down was Baker's CED.

4.3. The NAACP

Baker found herself jobless and in desperate need for money. In such situation her longtime friend, with whom she had worked in the YNCL suggested her to send her application to the National Office of the NAACP. Between 1938 and 1941 she applied for three different jobs within the organization: in 1938 and in 1940 she submitted twice her candidacy for Assistant youth director but she wasn't hired even though the latter submission was directly requested by the NAACP itself. Unless she performed an excellent interview, they preferred a young Madison Jones over her. In February 1941 Walter White, the NAACP executive secretary, decided to take a chance on her and hired Ella, for a six month period, as an assistant field secretary.

Such experiences marked Baker's first meeting with gender discrimination within a Civil Rights organization. It is unclear whether Baker had already realized that the Association was basically sexist, but given her acumen is highly possible.

When Baker entered the NAACP talks about an imminent entry of the U.S. into World War II were always more regulars. In such situation the Organization was working in order to end segregation in the so called defense industries and in the armed forces. One of the most important African- American newspapers, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, introduced the concept of "Double Victory" that is to say a program to defeat the Axis' powers, and at the same time win over Jim Crows laws in the U.S. As far as Baker was concerned she agreed with *The Pittsburgh Courier*. She taught that winning over the undemocratic countries of the Axis wouldn't have made the U.S. a democratic country itself, unless segregation had come to an end. She was convinced that if it was true that the U.S. were considered the *Land of Freedom*, built following the ideals of equality, liberty, and freedom, than segregation, and discrimination which are clearly undemocratic, shouldn't exist. In Ella's words

We must prove our democratic way of life by battling against and destroying such undemocratic forces as bigotry, injustice, racial prejudice and discrimination. [...] It's not enough to proclaim that we are a nation of free men because the nation was founded upon the principles of liberty, equality and freedom. We must see that every man is free to work and make a living in keeping with his ability; and that no one is denied the opportunity to an education because of class, creed or color [...].

Whenever democracy is strengthened by granting to Colored Americans a fuller measure of citizenship and manhood, all of the democratic forces throughout the world have been implemented. On the other hand every infringement upon the rights of Negroes as citizens and men, weakens the cause of democracy everywhere.¹³¹

Such line of thought was in direct contrast with the majority of American citizen's view, or at list those of whites', who saw their country as some sort of a savior whose only aim was to bring back the value of democracy, an example that everyone should followed as they were the *light of the world*¹³².

As soon as she entered the organization as field secretary Baker started to travel in order to extend the Association base, that is to say to find more activists willing to put their lives in danger for a bigger cause.

At the time the NAACP branches in the South were put together only by African-Americans as anti-racist whites were constantly threatened by racist and their organization such as the KKK, with their own lives. Sometimes in small towns the NAACP was the only Civil Rights Organization to play in the field.

During her years at the NAACP Baker had, sometimes, to preserve her autonomy, but right from the beginning she was very well appreciated by the most.

When she entered the Association she was hired as field secretary a job that given its major role of linking the NAACP national leadership to all the other association divisions, required hard working, long travels, and a lot of working hours.

¹³¹ Moyer, J. T., *op. cit.*, pos. 996- 999- 1002.

¹³² Reference to Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden".

By March 1941 Ella started to travel on behalf of the Organization and she did it with such a passion that she rarely took a break, she was always on the move giving speeches, and meeting people of every social class; after her speeches she rather stayed with normal people and create relationships with them than leave for a fancy dinner. Such behavior of hers founded its routes in her familiar background, but most of all in her ideas on how an organization should stand, that is to say on a large base of people's participation. Even though Baker knew she had a higher education compared to the people coming to her meetings she always showed herself like she was one of them because if you want someone to endanger their lives (not that they weren't before) and to share your view you need to make them identify with you « [...] instead of turning up your nose to turn them off [...]»¹³³ . Such simple, but at the same time smart, way of action turned Baker into the most appreciated field secretary by the people.

If the NAACP gave her the task to raise the number of the associates in order to scraped-together more money that they need to invest in the legal department for their trial against segregation, she never considered her audience as just a number, instead she deeply cared for them. She was certain that in order to mobilize masses one should create trustful and familial relationships as such kind of bonds were at the basis of local activism: someone might be more incline to adhere to a specific organization if its representative shows knowledge and interests over the problem of the community in which they belong.

Baker was convinced that the detached behaviors, of the majority of the local branch leaders, towards both social and political issues were preventing people from adhering to the movement. Such situation instead of reunite all Blacks under a same flag, which would ended up in the creation of a strong local branch, made places for divisions to spread.

Baker wanted to enlarge the base of the NAACP participation which should have included all social classes but also both sexes. Unfortunately the NAACP was not only a quite elitist organization, but was also gendered as men were its main components. She pushed women to participate, to become activists, to leave their houses and participate no matter what people would have thought. In her speeches

¹³³ Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, p. 113.

to the crowds, Ella was used to recall a mother of five children who managed to become an activist without leaving her children behind, demonstrating that women can be good mothers but at the same time being involved in other adventures. More in general talks about female active participation to the movement were at the order of the day. Baker recalled to be asked by a newly entered associate whether women should be part of a different branch and not of the already created one. She strongly refused such an option, because transfer all women in another all-female branch had the exact same effects of the segregation they were trying to defeat and because the organization would inevitably ended up with women leaving the cause. On the contrary she firmly believed that women participation should be enlarged. Her talks about gender equality didn't stopped when she became director of branches, on the contrary she started fighting more harshly in order to stop gender related discrimination.

Baker became director of branches in 1943. This new position allowed her to be influent on the organization's programs as she was charged with monitoring the field secretaries and organizing the national office with local groups. One of the first actions Ella undertook, as director of branches, was to enlarge the democratic base of the NAACP as she found inconceivable that the national office had more to say about the management of some local situation than the people actually working in the field. In trying to do such operation she met the hostilities of the executive secretary Walter White with whom she already had problems in the past caused by Baker non-elitist view of the organization's structure. This time she was actually jeopardizing his position as executive secretary of the movement. Her dedication to the reduction of bureaucracy within the organization automatically implied the reduction of the power of the executive secretary in favor of the one of local leaders « [...] persons living and working in a community are in a better position to select leadership for a community project than one coming into the community [...]»¹³⁴, vision that the elitist White didn't shared.

According to Baker, democracy had to be at the basis of the NAACP as it was the only solution to increase the number of its members. In order to achieve this goal, projects should have been chosen by following bottom up processes instead of top

¹³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 139.

down which means that local branches (peripheries) should have suggested to the national office (the core) what instances they should have followed. As a direct consequence of such re-organization the NAACP hierarchical stiffness, which allowed those at the national office to basically own the organization, would have lost its rigidity and favored local branches leaderships, which, at the moment, were left without any guidance, as White and his fellows were more preoccupied on talks rather than on actions, and considered their sections as some sort of their personal heralds or sheriffs of Nottingham as far as the raise of money was concerned.

In addition to this view Baker had another point of contrast with White: sexism. Baker thought that men and women should have the same possibility in all the aspects of life, and as far as the NAACP was concerned the presence of women, not only would have widen the democratic popular base but also made the Association more similar to the actual society. Unfortunately, women in the movement were highly underrated because of sexism.

These two points of disagreement, together with other problems, would never be resolved and are between the main causes which led Baker to leave the NAACP.

In the three years of her directorate, Baker, heedless of the more than possible White's reaction, organized some leadership congress in Tulsa, Shreveport, Atlanta, Chicago, Easton, Jacksonville and Indianapolis. Before each of those gatherings she was used to give the audience some questionnaires inquiring the audience over what theme they would have rather talk about. At list one of those conferences, the one hold in Atlanta, proved itself fundamental as two activists from Montgomery, Alabama attended it: Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon (see sub-chapter 2.2) with whom Ella Baker would become friend.

In the meantime her relationship with Walter White and other activists was coming to an end as they considered Baker as "difficult to work with" probably because they felt they leadership was put in danger by an unconventional woman. Critics over Baker grew drastically when she asked for some time off due to personal problems.

In summer 1945, Martha, who died in October, was gravely ill and Baker needed to be with her as much as she could; furthermore she adopted her nine-years-old

niece. Jackie was daughter to Maggie who wasn't able to look after her (she didn't know how to take care of herself, so carrying for a little girl was out of discussion) and for that reason she was living with Anna and Curtis. Anna was aging while Curtis who wrote to Ella about their mother's inability to raise the little girl was an unmarried man.

Even though Ella started thinking that her role within the organization was not, at least totally, compatible to her new role of mother, this wasn't the primary reason which led her to leave her job at the NAACP as she used to receive the help of her husband, who seemed to perfectly fit in his new role of a father, and of Mrs. Lena who lived upstairs.

As Baker said at the time of her departure from her role as director of branches:

[...] I feel that the Association is falling short of its present possibilities; that the full capacities of the staff have not been used; that there is little chance of mine being utilized in the immediate future. Neither one nor all of these reasons would induce me to resign if I felt that objective and honest discussions were possible and that remedial measures would follow. Unfortunately, I find no basis for expecting this. My reactions are not sudden but accumulative, and are based upon my own experience during the past five years and the experience of other staff, both present and former.¹³⁵

After her departure from the NAACP, the relationships she was able to build with members of the various branches turned to be beneficial as she was often called to participate and give one of her powerful speeches.

By 1952 she was appointed as the first woman to become president of the New York Branch. As soon as she took her chair she immediately moved the head office from downtown to Harlem. Right from the beginning of her presidency it was clear that she would have managed the entire Branch according to her ideas regarding the democratic process within the organization.

Between 1952 and 1953 Baker's Branch together with other organization started a powerful offensive in order to promote school reforms, and fight against segregation and police ruthlessness by always trying to not mention frequent talks

¹³⁵ Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, p. 146.

about the so called Cold War that in her opinion would have negatively influenced her work by shifting from local to international disputes.

As shown in her previous experiences as a Civil Rights activist she had always been interested in educating people and if in the 1930s she had spent a lot of time by teaching to adult people, in both the 1940s and 1950s she mainly focused on elementary and secondary education. Such a change in her interests might be related to the fact that Ella was forced to enlist Jackie in a private Quaker school as it was the only solution she and Bob had to educate their daughter in a desegregated environment. Anyway, Baker never believed that private structures could possibly fill the lack of the public ones and so her entire NAACP New York's Branch started to work together with Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clarks, two African- American psychologists, in order to increase schooling opportunities for all unfortunate children, the majority of whom had Puerto-Rican and African-American heritages. For once in her entire carrier Ella's goal corresponded to those of the NAACP: desegregation of public school. Their fights would end up in the 1954 Supreme Court's sentence *Brown vs. Board of Education* which declared the unconstitutionality of segregation in public schools. Before the Supreme Court sentence, Baker and her Branch supported the creation of the Parents in Action against Educational Discrimination, a movement of common people, which for the majority were African- American and Puerto Rican parents, fighting for their children rights to attend public and desegregated schools. Although the Supreme Court had declared segregation in schools unconstitutional, in 1957 Baker was still fighting the same war. Her Branch, together with Parents in Actions, was asking for better schools and teachers for their children. The absence of answers to their requests ended up in a very agitate demonstration right in front of the City Hall, where more than 500 demonstrators (Baker included) managed to obtain a meeting with Mayor Robert Wagner, achievement that had, probably, been possible thank to an observation Baker addressed to Wagner in which she underlined the fact that he couldn't refuse to listen to them as elections were closer. She was basically threatening the Mayor by saying that if he didn't, at least, listen to what those citizens had to say, they and all their fellow Blacks and

Puerto Ricans wouldn't have vote for him at the next elections, which was something Wagner could not afford.

Another crusade Baker started while President of the New York Branch was the one against police brutality which was a serious problem for the entire nation. Instances of citizens beaten by the police that reached the NAACP were hundreds per year. By February 1953 the anger rose as two prominent newspapers as *The New York Telegram* and *The Sun* published two articles in which the journalist revealed the presence of an undisclosed arrangement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the New York Police Department that prevented the FBI from looking into possible cases of police brutality, by classifying those actions as internal affairs. In response to those accusations, one month later the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association together with other police association declared that the accusations were nothing more than a "Communist plot" against police forces. Baker felt clearly that the citizens were being laughed at, and reacted by stating « [...] no communist plot can explain away the fact that Jacob Jackson¹³⁶ had to undergo two brain operations...nor does it explain how other able-bodied persons have walked into police precincts, but had to be carried out as hospital cases [...]»¹³⁷.

In late 1953 Baker decided to run for the New York City Council, and for that reason she left her role as President of the branch. She obviously was not elected, being a woman and black didn't helped her case, but she succeeded in defying the system.

Even though Ella tried hard not to mention the international Cold War related events in order to not shift the public attention from local threats, such a view was not shared by the majority of the American population. Around the so called Cold War those at the power managed to create some sort of a national psychosis for which everything that happened was caused by some sort of plot orchestrated by the Soviets. Following this line of thought the NAACP was accused to be linked to the communist party. The NAACP was indeed composed by people of different political believes, so members of the communist party were indeed activists (at

¹³⁶ Jacob Jackson and Samuel Crawford, in summer 1952 were seriously beaten by two police officers in the West 54th Street station.

¹³⁷ Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, p. 157.

the same way as the liberals, the democrats and others were) and no one of them had never caused problems within the organization or had ever behaved as national threats. Baker herself admired some of the communist principles, and had a lot of friend who were members of the party, and for that she was watched by the FBI as a possible dissident. She was soon cleared.

In the late 1950s due to the increase of threats, and act of forces, it became clear to the NAACP national office they needed to purge all the activists who were also members of the communist party. Baker who was working on the executive committee of the New York branch was invited to assist the Internal Security Committee with the task of removing from their position every subject sympathetic to the communist ideology.

4.4. In Friendship

When Anna Ross died on December 1954 Ella felt the need to continue her work and economically support those who were fighting for freedom in the deep South. In the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (see subchapter 2.2) , Baker, together with Stanley Levison¹³⁸ and Bayard Rustin¹³⁹, brought In Friendship to life- in order to assist those activist who were fighting for desegregate public transportation in Montgomery. In such situation while the NAACP interests were focusing on the advent of a new leadership, the one led by Martin Luther King Jr, Ella was paying attention to the bottom of the movement, that is to say to the citizen. Actually, she was more than pleased to see that what was happening down there, what Rosa Parks, who was acquainted to Baker, and her fellow citizens managed to put in practice, was exactly what she have been preaching for the last couples of decades: a bottom up participation. She argued that boycott was « [...] unpredicted, where thousands of individuals, just black ordinary people, subjected themselves to inconveniences that were certainly beyond the thinking of most folk... this meant you had a momentum that had not been seen, even in the work of the NAACP.

¹³⁸ Stanley Levison was a Jewish businessman and lawyer associate with the communist party.

¹³⁹ Bayard Rustin was a Black gay Quaker affiliate to the communist party.

And it was something that suggested the potential for widespread action throughout the South [...] ¹⁴⁰.

Unlike the NAACP, In Friendship allowed all people of all the faiths, political parties and social classes to participate to its works. Although Baker's role as executive secretary was initially unpaid she put her soul to see her project become to life. Her efforts were repaid on February 29th, 1956 when the first campaign, called "Action Conference" was launched in order to raise money for the Mississippi farmers. In the same year, on December 1956, In Friendship organized another fund-raising at the Manhattan Center. In this occasion activists such as Harry Belafonte, Duke Ellington and Coretta Scott King (wife to Martin Luther King Jr.) took the stage to celebrate the achievement of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. During the event \$1.800 were collected. The money raised were half donated to the MIA, while the rest was granted to two Black tenants in Yazoo, Mississippi and in Clarendon County, North Carolina who had been removed from their jobs because, right after the *Brown vs. Board of Education's* Supreme Court sentence, they tried to enroll their children into an historically white- only school. Such kind of help was typical to In Friendship, actually it was the reason behind its creation. Baker wanted to help all of the activists, which in the South were for the major part poor, uneducated people and economically dependent on whites, that she considered at the basis of the Movement. She also managed to support local leaders by paying them to be present at as much meetings, workshops and conferences as they could, as she was certain that in this way they would have learn to organize their followers.

Eventually, this organization lasted only for three years as it was replaced by other bigger Civil Rights organizations created with the enlargement of the Movement itself, but it was fundamental as the new associations took inspiration from In Friendship. One example of all is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King Jr.

¹⁴⁰ Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, p. 162.

4.5. The SCLC

On January 1957, Baker and Rustin went South in order to support and participate to the meeting which would ended up with the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) whose primary purpose was the continuation in all Southern States of the Montgomery protest.

Baker was quite exited for the results achieved in Alabama because it meant that her theories regarding the possibility of the creation of a democratic association with a bottom up approach, which was in direct contrast with the NAACP's structure, were applicable to real life. Following this line of thoughts she considered the leaders who came out from the battle the most successful. Even though, for the entire years of the Boycott, Baker and her association In Friendship had economically supported low profile activists under the belief that they would have made the difference, both the national and international attentions were focused toward a young minister from Atlanta, Georgia: Martin Luther King Jr.

The creation of the SCLC is normally bestowed to Martin Luther King Jr., even if both the Reverend and Baker claimed that it was something originated from the minds of the majority of the activists as they felt the need of the presence of an organization they could entrust. This underline the fact that the organization of the Civil Rights Movement' was not structured.

Right from the beginning Baker's relationship with King wasn't perfect. If she seemed to despise the power he had obtain- she thought that all the fame he had gained was unmerited as there were more deserving activists who had fallen into the unknown- King, in some occasions, acted like a chauvinist. While structuring the Conference a public political personality was needed and King thought of both Levison and Rustin- who, by that time, had become his personal advisers- but not of Baker, who was the most navigate activist between them all. In such situation Baker's disappointment was deep as her project for a non- gendered, non- class differentiated organization was ultimately over. In such situation she stated « [...] After all, who was I? I was a female, I was old. I didn't have any Ph. D. [...] »¹⁴¹.

¹⁴¹ Ivi, p. 173.

Regardless of all such personal dramas, the SCLC was brought to life on January 10th, 1957 in Dr. Martin Luther King Sr.' Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Ella worked for the organization of the meeting in which the structure of the SCLC was decided. The Baptist Church was at the basis of the new organization and it managed to link various Baptist ministers who were fighting for Black freedom. During the gathering it was also decided that in order to preserve their goals they would apply the nonviolence principle.

It is highly probable that the choice of the group to add the word "Christian" was related to the Cold War. Basically, they feared to be accused of being a group of communists, as happened to the NAACP, and by including such a word, they would have saved the group from such accusation (soviets were said to be atheists). Ministers- in order to be considered as "decent people" (as the white components of the American society were) - always showed themselves as exemplary human being: perfectly educated and well- dressed people, devoted to Good.

Baker, at the start of the January 10th meeting, had already realized that the structure and the organization of the Conference would have never met her expectation for two main reasons: women, who had proven fundamental, such as Rosa Parks and Joanne Gibson Robinson, for the success of the Montgomery Boycott were offered to participate to the SCLC, but they were never allowed to occupy leadership roles; in addition to that, Baker was worried about the general situation in the South where the majority of Black citizens were living in a situation of deep poverty and the SCLC seemed to care only about their access to the vote.

On May 17th, 1957, exactly three years after the *Brown vs. Board of Education's* sentence the SCLC made its first public appearance at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Baker was obviously within the main organizers. As a consequence of such a meeting, which put together between 25.000 and 30.000 peaceful demonstrators, President Eisenhower was obliged to meet with some Civil Rights leaders and later ratified the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which predisposed the creation of a Civil Rights Commission appointed with the task to search any possible voting right abuse.

After the Pilgrimage Baker went back to New York, in fact, although she participated to the creation of the SCLC she was still a member of the NAACP New York's Branch and a founding member of the still-surviving In Friendship. She considered each of these groups different, but at the same time necessary parts of the same fight to win over injustices towards Black citizen.

By February 1958 the SCLC had organized another campaign, the *Crusade for Citizenship*, with the goal of multiply the number of African- American voters in the Southern States who were prevented to vote by the whites' segregation system. In order to put together such Crusade the SCLC needed someone with organizational and political experienced abilities. Levison and Rustin immediately promoted Ella's candidacy, as they considered her the most experienced activist in the field, with a lot of important connections. Given the situation, a skeptical King decided to hire Baker as a field organizer, until a more suitable figure was found.

When Baker first arrived in Atlanta, in mid-January 1958, she found no phone, or staff, actually the entire office was missing and in order to proceed with her work she was forced to utilize the resources of the Ebenezer Baptist Church which was led by King's father, Martin Luther King Sr., once the church's employees had done with their jobs. Luckily for the entire organization Rev. Samuel Williams, a member of the SCLC, offered an office to Baker and soon it became the coordination center of the Conference.

The Crusade program aimed to organize meetings in as much cities as they could, and twenty-one cities adhered to the project. The amount of work Baker had to face in such a situation was quite significant: she wrote and sent letters, spoke on the phone (sometimes for almost the entire day) and as she was not satisfied by the achievements she obtained, by staying behind a desk, she packed her things up and started traveling in order to help her cause towards a direct approach with the people they wanted to influence. Even though the NAACP didn't help the SCLC's cause as the national office feared that the newborn conference wanted to "overthrown" the first from its position of absolute leadership, most of the NAACP branches were proven fundamental in helping Baker to organize the mobilization.

Although Baker managed to successfully organize the Crusade for Citizenship she was certain that King and the other SCLC's ministers had never considered to employ her in a permanent way. This situation had a lot to do with the general organization of the Baptist Church which was pervaded by a culture of gender discrimination which founded its basis in the more vast American gendered culture. As Baker once stated « the role of women in the southern church [...] was that of doing the things that the minister said he wanted to have done. It was not one in which they were credited with having creativity and initiative and capacity to carry out things »¹⁴².

Baker had a really hard time in bearing the way men treated women within the Conference, and obviously she often spoke her mind about the problem, but in general it might be argued that her pugnacious behavior was held back by the certainty that they were fighting for an even important achievement: Blacks' freedom.

With the passing of the days Baker became less indulgent toward ministers' behaviors as she realized their actions appeared to be in direct contrast with what they preached in their sermons « [...] after spending the morning at some sister's house doing what they shouldn't have been doing [...]»¹⁴³.

Despite of Baker's disgust for ministers she continued working for the SCLC by enrolling, examining and choosing new aspirants for the role of executive director.

Baker's disappointments weren't the only problems the SCLC had to face: on September 1958 King survived an attempted murder- while in Harlem publicizing his new book entitled *Stride toward Freedom*- staged by a woman suffering of mental illness. Luckily King survived the stabbing but was forced to suspend all the activities on his agenda. In order to face such situation Ella temporarily took the stage and fulfilled to all the events King was scheduled to participate: from public speeches for the Conference to promoting his new volume. While substituting King she became even more reluctant about her participation to the SCLC as she understood that nothing moved unless King didn't want to.

¹⁴² Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, pag. 184.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem.*

At this point is necessary to underline the fact that Baker's frictions with King did not include his persona- she was deeply touched by his stubbing (and later homicide) and appreciated him for stepping into the Civil Rights' cause instead of hiding himself in the Black middle, class he was part of- but rather to his public persona which contrasted with Baker's idea of a bottom-up movement, as she thought that the national and international focus on his leadership would have ended up in the self- alienation of local leaders. She argued that « [...] Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program [...]»¹⁴⁴.

4.6. The SNCC

Some historians argued that in the late 1950s the harshening of the Cold War had turned the Civil Rights organizations into fragile organisms, but things were very different.

In 1959 the struggle spread in a more local level and brought to some of the most powerful mass mobilization of the entire history of the Movement. In such situation Baker, while still working for the Conference, started working with those local associations in order to organize them. Two of the organizations she worked with were: the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) in Birmingham, and the United Christian Movement Inc. (UCMI) in Shreveport, Louisiana.

As far as Ella was concerned she was deeply enthusiastic for the new developments in the deep South as it was exactly what she had been hoping for in her entire carrier as a Civil Rights activist, that is to say a strong mobilization of the local communities.

Even though many of the local leaders were associated with the SCLC, not all of them had embraced the principle of non-violence - dear to King- and Baker, herself, was quite skeptical as in many cases the refusal of using violence would

¹⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 188.

have eventually (and did) led to the death of Black citizens. Baker was obviously not encouraging Black people to start a civil war, but better to defend themselves, and their lives by any mean possible as the Constitution allowed them to.

The resistance of southern people toward Jim Crow Laws was so inspiring for Baker that she became more and more intolerant of her position within the SCLC, and by the time she was planning to leave King's organization the mass mobilizations had been substituted by sit-ins.

On February 1st, 1960, four African- American college students declared they would have not leave the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, until someone didn't served them to eat in the white-reserved area. After a four days occupation the white owner decided to bring them some lunch, right where they wanted. Soon, this action became the first of many and by the end of the spring more than 100 southern cities had follow those students' example. A lot of peaceful protesters became victims of white racist's counter-demonstrators.

When Baker heard about the sit-ins they didn't made their appearance into national television and newspapers yet, she was overjoyed- even though surprised by the speed with which these sit-ins were organized- because it appeared to her that all her talks about a more participated democracy, characterized by a bottom up participation were finally becoming real.

Manifestations, sit- ins, and mass mobilizations where organized by local leaders, but as soon as Baker became involved, in each one of their activities, she decided they needed to be brought together, as she was convinced they would have benefited from the sharing of expertise, and resources.

In those early moments Baker was working on behalf of the SCLC- which was interested to made those young students flow into the organization- and was pretty much astonished by the accomplishment they managed to reach in such a short period of time, without the help of the most influent organizations such as the SCLC and the NAACP.

Being certain that those activists needed to be educated to the Civil Rights struggle, with the support of the SCLC, Baker organized a meeting from the 16th to the 18th of April, 1960. The gathering was an enormous success as two hundred people showed up. The meeting was held at Shaw University. Even though Baker

would have proven essential for the development of the student's movement the majority of people hasten into the meeting because Martin Luther King was scheduled to give one of his powerful speeches. In this very occasion Ella was very pleased to exploit King's fame and popularity because it was a way to attract people and his presence would have convinced the crowd that their actions were important at national level, that they were essential in the quest.

While the activists who joined the convention were discussing issues, and more in general brain storming each- others, Ella was influencing the entire crowd. First of all she made sure that the SCLC wouldn't absorb the Students' Movement for two main reasons: not all the students shared the philosophy of non-violence, and neither Baker who at the same time feared that their annexation to the SCLC would have turned them into some moderate bureaucratic system which would ended up in dissolving their promising actions; secondly she managed to reduce to the minimum the presence of the media, and this not because she had something against them, but because she wanted the attendees to speak their minds freely without being influenced by the presence of both the press and television. Such choice can also be related to the fact that King was there, and back in those times wherever and whenever he went media were following him, so it is possible that both him and Ella took such decision in order to focus on student's activities rather than on King's persona. King presence was needed because students would better realize they were important, essential for a better change.

By the end of the meeting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) - sometimes pronounced *snick*- was brought to life and both Baker and King were asked to assist them as adult counselors. It appears clear that the new Committee was created by considering both Baker's and King's visions as it was separated from the SCLC and had embraced the principle of nonviolence.

Baker's democratic approach had always caused her a lot of problems with other organizations. She was convinced that any individual had the right to make a difference, to be its own leader, and to participate in every social sphere regardless of their education, their gender or the color of their skin. Following this line of thought women, from the beginning to the end of the group, were able to

become leaders. The SNCC was the first, and maybe the only, non-gender Civil Rights Organization.

Following the creation of the SNCC, in order to help the youngest part of the Movement to organize itself (or to influenced it) Baker left the SCLC even though she remained very close to her previous colleagues as the new born group momentarily occupied a corner in the SCLC's base of Auburn Avenue. Right from the beginnings student leaders were called to participate to national meetings together with the most important leaders from the NAACP and the SCLC, King included.

From its creation in 1960 to early 1961 the SNCC organized sit-ins almost everywhere from theaters to bus stations, basically everywhere the segregationist laws were applied. Their popularity would eventually grow when they became involved with the *Freedom Rides*: groups of interracial men and women traveling from North to South, who defied "Colored" and "White Only" signals by using the same rest and waiting rooms. As expected busses were burnt and freedom riders beaten almost to death, but what was worst was that even representatives of the U.S. Justice Department and journalists who had been appointed with the task of observing and reporting to the Federal Government, participated to the beatings. Such inflamed situation put at stake the relationship between President Kennedy and the African- American community who had voted for him in mass as he promised he would have been their ally. Kennedy was accused of not being fast enough in its responses, and to not care about Blacks. Such point of view was contrasted by both King (and later by its biographers) and Kennedy himself who from his election, to the day of his assassination made numbers of remarks and law propositions, such as the Civil Rights Acts, in which it appeared clear he was fund of the African- American cause:

[...] I am certain that it was no easy task to compress into a single volume the American Negro's century-long struggle to win the full promise of our Constitution and Bill of Rights.

He has not, of course, been alone in this struggle. Men and women of every racial and religious origin have helped. But I am sure that this report will remind us that it is the Negroes themselves, by their courage and steadfastness, who have done

most to throw off their legal, economic, and social bonds which, in holding back part of our Nation, have compromised the conscience and haltered the power of all the Nation. In freeing themselves, the Negroes have enlarged the freedoms of all Americans [...].¹⁴⁵

Both King and Kennedy seemed to underline the fact that late and insufficient responses weren't caused by the Presidential lack of concern, but better for the presence of other international worries concerning the survival of the American supremacy, i. e. the hardening of the Cold War.

In order to try and save the Freedom Riders' lives the federal government charged them with the violation of segregation ordinances (of the State they were protesting in) and sentenced them to a brief period of jail. Obviously such resolution was absurd but it saved lives. After months of beatings and incarcerations the Interstate Commerce Commission ordered the desegregation of all means of transportation by September.

Such victory was very important for the SNCC as it proven its abilities to influence national politics and to gain the determination it was needed for the achievement of the entire Movement's goal: Civil Rights for African-Americans.

With the winning over the segregationist rules the SNCC became bigger not only in fame but also the number of the associates increase. Talks about the group actions were at the order of the day and while a branch thought that they should followed the path in which they started, that is to say by continuing with the organization of sit-ins and other high profiled meetings; others thought that they should have concentrated their forces preparing local people with the goal of politically empowering the majority of the citizens they could, more specifically by educating the masses in exercising their voting and registrations rights. Differences became so widen that some of the SNCC came to the conclusion that the association should have been divided, but, for Baker, this wasn't an option and she strongly stated that « I opposed the split as serving the purpose of the enemy»¹⁴⁶. Baker instead suggested the development of two sections: one charged with the

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9555&st=civil+rights&st1=>

¹⁴⁶ Ransby, B., *op. cit.*, p. 269.

task of educating voters and the other one with the mission of scheduling direct actions and manifestations.

The influence of Ella Baker was palpable especially in the works of the “educational branch” that brought back to life the “Baker’s Model”, in other words Ella’s *modus operandi*, she used while in the NAACP and SCLC, of bonding with the local communities.

In spite of the media indifference in Baker’s work and personality, it appeared evident that she was considered the principal advisor of the young movement.

The SNCC played a very important role in all the raisings that developed in Southern States in the early and mid-1960s, but it proved fundamental in the Black Freedom movement’ voting rights campaign which took place in Mississippi between 1961 and 1964.

The majority, if not all, of the activists, Baker befriended, thought of Mississippi as some sort of an impenetrable fortress but Baker was certain that in order to kill the monster (racism) it needed to be eradicated from its roots.

This Southern state was the nightmare of every activist because no one knew what was happening down there. Journalists were prevented to report any of the actions the racists engaged against the black population, and even the federal government was able to receive few information about the situation.

Following her aim of educating rural and poor population Baker (and of course the SNCC) wanted to enter Mississippi- by using any means possible- so she started her quest by reconnecting with all the Mississippian activists she meet while working for the NAACP and the SCLC.

By the time they arrived in the racists state, SNCC activists started to develop a plan of action that would brought there media and, as a consequence, national attention.

The problem was that they didn’t know how. Basically there were two schools of thought: the first was convinced that more white activists from the North had to come there and contrast their fellow whites’ segregationist environment; while the second suggested to focus on the local black population and in their ability to learn. This second option was mostly shared by Baker who was convinced that it was necessary « [...] to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are

not the only protection they have against violence or injustice. [...] People have to made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.»¹⁴⁷

The second choice was ultimately the one the organization engaged for two main reasons: it was the most close to Baker's line of thought; and the SNCC feared for the lives of the white activists. In the history of Mississippi white anti-segregationists suffered more brutal torture than Blacks as they were conceived to be traitors of the motherland.

Following their decision the SNCC started a huge operation for the registration of black voters. The entire operation was sponsored by the Council of Federated Organization (COFO), a Mississippian Civil Rights group, and even though the majority of the helpers came from the SNCC, the NAACP and the SCLC participated too. The 1963 campaign called *Freedom Vote* was carried through by the students, mostly white, of northern universities who according to the plans had to move across the state and collect vote for a fake election. It turned out that 98 percent of Black voters, who apparently were interested to vote, were prevented from giving their ballot by whites' criminal behaviors.

SNCC volunteers worked frantically for three years and managed to achieve some consistent results.

The 1964 *Freedom Summer* was the most promoted of all the projects the SNCC undertook in Mississippi.

Whites activist had always been important for the Civil Rights Movement as a lot of its fundamental achievements were possible thanks to their presence. In Baker's view, it was not that white activists were more important the black ones, rather they were complementary to each other. Stressing from this vision Baker was convinced that in order to introduce black Mississippian to the democratic process white student activists had to travel south and become teachers. A lot of students answered to the call, but if Baker was thrilled by the number of northerner that had signed in, other organizers were concerned about three main worries: the first two regarded the massive presence of white activists- Would their presence weaken the blacks' one? Having all those anti-segregationists whites in their cities would intensify whites' racist acts of violence? -; the third

¹⁴⁷ Lerner, G., "Developing Community Leadership", in *Black Women in White America*, New York, Pantheon, 1972, p. 347.

was related to the commitment of non-violence- should they respond to brutalities with acts of force or not?

In order to answer these questions a SNCC veterans gathering was held from June 9th to the 11th. In the meeting Baker spoke her mind out, underlying once again her huge influence on the organization. As far as the first two questions were concerned she answered that:

One of the reasons we're going into Mississippi is that the rest of the United States has never felt much responsibility for what happens in the Deep South. The country feels no responsibility and doesn't see that as an indictment. Young people will make the Justice Department move [...]. If we can simply let the concept that the rest of the nation bears responsibility for what happens in Mississippi sink in, then we will have accomplished something.¹⁴⁸

When it came to the third, she recalled that their organization was not devoted to violence, but neither to the “authorized” killings of its member. It was ultimately decided that activists, participating to the summer project were not allowed to carry a gun, even some of them did.

One of the biggest projects who came out from the *Freedom Summer* were the *Freedom Schools*. Such schools had been created in order to support black education in the State. When the first school was opened on July 4th, 1964, it was clear that Ella's directions had once, once again, been followed. Even though activists taught the American Constitution and how to read and write in order to prepare black citizen to the test that would have allowed them to vote, as the Citizenship schools did, they wanted their students to develop critical skills which was exactly what Ella had been preaching for her entire career as an activist.

Even though Baker left the SNCC in 1967, the rise to fame of the association, as we know it, and the achievements it obtained during the years have to be connected to Ella Baker and her democratic principles.

¹⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 322.

During the 1940s Baker collaborated with other movement and organization such as she remained very active in the field of the Civil Rights until her death on December 13th, 1986, day of her 83rd birthday. Her strong ideas, her personality, her principle and her stubbornness will always influence our lives.

4.7. It was all about democracy

All her activism was based on the principle of participatory democracy which rotate around three main ideas: civil society's participation is essential in the process of decision making; the power of hierarchies must be reduced in favor of the one of the organizations operating for a social change; and direct interventions in the places where injustice rules.

Her faith in such principle, which came directly from her youth in North Carolina, was at the basis of her entire life and, to fulfill such vision she left two of the most important Civil Rights Organizations. She felt both the NAACP and the SCLC were filled with bureaucracy and reflected their image on the heroic figure of its leaders. While talking of the SCLC and of his leader, Martin Luther King Jr., she once said that:

In government service and political life I have always felt it as a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 351.

In order to pursue her democratic vision, which included a deep sense of equality, Baker decided that people living in rural area, and more in general the poor, needed to be educated because education was the only way they had to achieve freedom.

Right after her studies at Shaw, she fought against her mother and against a gendered society to not become a teacher because that was exactly what they were expecting from her. Eventually she would turned into one of them, of course not in the classic mean of the term, but always an educator.

Baker's educational approach was affected by the Italian Marxist's theorist Antonio Gramsci who thought that « every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil is always a teacher »¹⁵⁰. Stressing from this Gramscian reflection, Baker realized that a good teacher should learn from its students and not taught to them without appreciating whatever they have to say, both scholars and educators needed to teach and learn from each other. She didn't wanted her students to listen to her without any objections, to think that she was some sort of a reservoir of knowledge they couldn't contradict. She aimed to develop their critical skills no matter to what social class or racial group her students belonged to. Education depends on teamwork for that is important to participate, brainstorm and listen to what others have to say. This thought of her was also related to another assumption Gramsci made during his stay in prison « The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feeling and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” not just a simple orator»¹⁵¹.

The act of teaching should follow the democratic principle too, so been able to listen to other people talking was essential, and Baker did it multiple times. During the conferences she held for the NAACP, the SCLC and the SNCC Baker remained hours without emitting a sound while listening to some discussion. She actually was very interested to the crowd's talks which she considered useful in order to understand the societies in which those people were living. The

¹⁵⁰ Morera, E., “Gramsci and democracy”, in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 23, n. 1, March 1990, p.28-37.

¹⁵¹ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 9, 10. Cited from Ransby B., *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 2003, Kindle Edition.

understanding and the knowledge of a certain society were essential for the activists, and a previous awareness of the local traditions, cultures, and problems would have facilitated their works.

Conclusion

Women actions in the Civil Rights Movement were fundamental for its development and for the achievements it obtained, but they are still forgotten by history, or better by those who write about history. This situation depends on the fact that the Movement's aim was to reach racial and not gender equality, and in pursuing such goal men had to demonstrate that the African –American community wasn't different from the white racist one, and that is why the clothing they worn, the hairstyle they showed off, and the behavior they had were identical to those of the whites. If I think about the pictures of that time I can't recall any activist wearing an afro cut. The willingness to resemble to such racist society had a direct effect on Black women who had to acquire the same style white female had: the one of great housekeeper. With the results that they were discriminated twice: first for being female, and second for the color of their skin.

This situation obviously resulted in the underappreciation of black women activists, who fought with the same strength and the same courage men did. Their activism had the ability to connect the poor black population with the black elite at the core of the Movement, and all the campaigns which took place were possible thanks to women's fundraising activities.

Stressing from these facts I wanted to underline how women fought not only against the white segregationist society but also against the gendered Movement they were working for, which didn't allow them to take their right places in history. Such gender differentiations are explained in the first two chapters of my work where the theories about a gendered American society and its reflections on the African-American one, and as a consequence on the Civil Rights Movement, are explained by trying to redefying through a non-gendered point of view some of the most important facts of the time. While, in the second part I've tried to put the "notions" into "practice", that is to say to transfer the ideas of the first part into the life and actions of two of the most important female leaders of the Civil Rights Movement: Septima Poinsette Clark and Ella Josephine Baker, women who refused to embody the classical definition of womanhood, and for that were

erased by the annals of history no matter how fundamental their actions had proved to be.

Without Septima Clark the SCLC, led by the most famous Martin Luther King Jr, would have never accomplished the titanic effort of bringing to vote 50.000 black citizens in only one year. Such achievement was possible only because Clark had always believed that colored adults needed, and had their right, to be educated because education would have freed them from whites' domination, and at the same time would have improved their confidence in themselves and in their capabilities and importance as civic citizens. The *Citizenship Education Program* would have never been created if it hadn't been for Septima Clark multi-decennials experience in adult education.

Without Ella Baker, the SCLC's *Crusade for Citizenship*, would have turned into a ruinous experience but thanks to her contacts in both Northern and Southern States she managed to arrange all the meetings King spoke in. If it wasn't for Baker the SNCC would have been absorbed by the SCLC which was looking for young people, but she managed to safeguard the students' organization because in her mind students had to follow their own projects and not those of some famous leaders. If the SCLC would have been able to assimilate the SNCC, Baker and the students wouldn't probably been capable to enter Mississippi and fight the monster (segregation) from its stomach, *Freedom Riders* and the *Freedom Summer* in which the *Freedom Schools* developed would have never existed.

Unlike men, women are also to be considered the guardians on the Movement's democratic principles. Both Clark and Baker found themselves in contrast with the general believe that the leader was an essential figure for the Movement. Actually they realized that someone started to believe that the leader was the Movement. In order to erase such certainty from people's minds they went against the system and tried to widen the democratic basis of the campaign, but they always founded male activists resistances. Clark and Baker wanted every single person to feel part of the Movement, they wanted to let their voices be heard, but apparently no men supported, at least publicly, their line of thoughts.

I think that giving back a voice to all the underrated women of the Civil Rights Movement is fundamental because we are missing a very important side of the

story, which would help us shaping a more accurate knowledge of its structures and actions. It means to recognize the sacrifices those women had to endure for the well-being of an entire population.

It is also important to recognize these women's roles because the Civil Rights Movement didn't stop with the killing of Martin Luther King Jr, on April 4th, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. There is still not a total racial equality in the "biggest western democracy". There are different participants but the aim is always the same, and they need to know what women did, so that they can learn and maybe win this fight for freedom and equality definitively.

Attachments

N. 1:

***AIN'T I A WOMAN?* by Sojourner Truth, delivered 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio.**

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come

from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.¹⁵²

¹⁵² <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/sojour.htm>.

N. 2:

*Rosa Parks, August 21, 1956, Public School Integration Work Shop,
Monteagle, Tennessee*

Mr. Pierce, Mrs. Clark, and ladies and gentlemen,

The whole cause of our trouble in Montgomery, as anywhere else, is segregation which is the evil that exists, the artificial legal segregation, and the transportation is very painful, very humiliating, and the drivers made very good use of it. Our city ordinance, of course, says that a driver has police powers in which he can enforce segregation by moving his passengers. If he desires a person to move from one seat, there should be another for this person to take it. If a colored person is sitting too near the front or somewhere near, the white person should take it; this person if ordered from a seat should have another one available. In my own case this was not true and as well as in others where arrests had taken place.

In Montgomery, long before our protest began, on some occasions, I had been on committees to appear before the city officials with requests that they improve our conditions that existed that were so humiliating and degrading to our spirit, as well as sometimes physical discomfort in riding the bus. We would have some vague promises and be given the runaround and nothing was ever done about it. And they continue to grow worse instead of better; it showed no improvement whatever.

As late as March 1955, when this fifteen- year- old girl in Montgomery, a high school girl was arrested for not giving up a seat, even much further to the rear of the bus than I was; she was handcuffed and taken to jail and of course tried and found guilty on at least three counts and put on probation. And there was another arrest in the fall, about October, of a teenage girl who refused to give up a seat, I'm sure to stand, and she paid her fine.

And when my arrested occurred, of course, that is when the protests actually began in Montgomery, and I want to say here that it was not at all planned on my part, because I, at the time, was only interested in getting

home from work and trying to rest and be prepared to work the next day. While I have always been against segregation because of its placing persons in inferior positions because of something that they have no control of- the color of their skin- it is also bad if not worse for the person imposing the segregation. I'm sure people who enforce such inhuman laws cannot in all fairness to themselves feel that they are doing the right thing if they look at the issue from a Christian and human standpoint. So it is my opinion, it has always been, and I'm sure it always will be, that we must abolish such evil practices where they are legal, especially, and every person should be given their right to live and treat others as they would like to be treated.

And it was not with this thought, when the officer placed me under arrest, said that he didn't know why the laws were pushing us around, I felt that some of us should find out in some way. I had no idea that it would cause the interest and excitement that it did, or cause the movement that took place. But it felt that at some time and once for all, after this question had never been answered, that it should be known: why we do things and why we have to obey such unfair laws; it is unfair, unjust, and unchristian. And as long as we continue to be pushed around, we were treated much worse, and there had to be a stopping point, so this seemed to have been a place for me to stop being pushed around and find out what human rights that we had, if any¹⁵³.

¹⁵³ Davis W. Houch, Davis E. Dixon, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, University Press of Mississippi. Kindle Edition, pos. 812- 831.

N. 3: Mamie Till Bradley, October 29, 1955, Bethel Ame Church, Baltimore, Maryland

I want you to know what they did to my boy.

During the last two months, I have found it very necessary to talk to God quite a few times.

When I first found out that Emmett was kidnapped, I was just so upset and so shocked I didn't know what to do. So, having been dependent on my mother most of my life, the first thing that I did was to call her. I thought that when I got to mother's house, she could take care of everything. She could handle it. This would be another burden that I could dump on her. When I got to mother's house, she had started making enormous telephone calls and she had found out nothing.

We stood there. We sat there. We waited for two or three days trying to find out what had happened to Emmett. During these two or three days, I looked at my mother and saw that she was failing. I was sitting at the telephone one night. I saw her walk through the dining room toward the front room. She weakened as she got there, and fell to the floor. I noticed as she passed me, I was getting stronger as she was getting weaker. It kind of startled me.

When she fell, I jumped up to run in there and put my hand on her and all of a sudden it seemed that something told me that if you touch her, you'll take her strength so fast, it'll kill her. So I stood there. I asked the others to let her alone. She'll be all right, I said and turned around and took my seat at the telephone.

I had been answering the phone night and day, taking messages and trying to send messages. And that's when I realized, for the first time in my life, I was going to have to stand up on my feet and be a woman. A real one. And I started praying to God to give me strength. Because I just thought that I could never have anything that mama couldn't handle or daddy couldn't

take care of. As long as I had them, there was no point to exert myself too much. But with mother there and with father there, there was still something that I had to do that nobody else could do. I I sent the message out. I tried to get through to Mississippi. Ladies and gentlemen, the hardest think in the world that I have ever tried to do is get a call into Mississippi and get information out.

We remark about the Iron Curtain in Russia, but there's a cotton curtain in Mississippi that must have a steel lining. When you make a telephone call, don't know who signals whom, but the person that you want to talk to doesn't want to talk if the call is coming from Chicago. The people that you always knew as being great, wonderful leaders, suddenly had nothing whatsoever to say. We called the home of the man on whose my uncle has worked for forty years. That man said that he was too old to hear. He didn't have a pencil. He didn't know where the paper was. He was just in a helpless condition. He couldn't even call anybody to the phone who could take the message. In fact there was nobody there. I thought what a shame for all of those people to go out and leave that helpless old man at that telephone. But just about the time that the crops were gathered in and they start weighing up to find what they are going their sharecroppers, this old man gets very active. He loses all that helplessness. He's able to make calls. He's able to go over and tell a poor sharecropper that he only cleared ten dollars this year, that his bills ran rather high. There is no accounting system down around these farms. They just have to take what the white man says.

Now before I get too far. I want to stop and point out and make clear that our job her tonight is not to stir up a whole lot of racism. We're not trying to start a race riot. Instead, we're only trying to pinpoint and to focus on the conditions that make this no true democracy. Standing up here tonight and talking to you white people and to you colored people, I want to say we're not trying to start trouble, we're trying to end trouble. The trouble is down there where a man can't look at a man and judge him by his color. Many of us have been in homes where the mother and the father battle

each other constantly. A neighbor doesn't have to walk in there and break up that home, it breaks up itself. Well, that's just what's going to happen here in these United States if the white man and the black man fight one other day in and day out. Foreign powers won't have to come over to destroy us. We'll just stand here and disintegrate. I'm kind of proud of being a part of a great nation. I wouldn't want to think that my nation was getting behind. Sure we have progressed so far in the past. I think we can do better now because we have more to work with.

The average person now is intelligent. We get a chance to go to school to learn how to love our neighbors and love one another, to respect a man for what he is worth and represents. Why should we let a few states upset all of that? Why should we let them put us back in the dark ages? I don't want to go back there. I received letters from some well-wishers. They weren't intentional well-wishers, however: they were hate letters. They wrote me: I'm glad it was your n***** boy that was killed; that'll show me more smart kids in Chicago that they can't come down in Mississippi and get away with in Chicago. I would like to tell those people tonight, if it hadn't been for those letters, I probably wouldn't be standing here. I want them to know that every one of those letters gave me a new determination to stand up and fight that much harder. I do realize that those people are going to be taught. As long as they exist, and as long as their minds stay dirty, we're going to have a little harder time progressing and advancing. I also know that if I'm upsetting just one of them, then I feel I'm doing a pretty good job. We sat at our telephone trying to get through to Mississippi and get these different messages in and out. Finally we had to resort to telegrams. I wired my uncle some money and told him to do the best he could. I would wait for a reply, but the answer that I asked for never did come back and we went through hours and hours of such torture. And finally on Wednesday, with the presses working and everybody working, the news finally came through. Emmett Till's body had been found in Mississippi. The news came through a girl friend of mine. She knew that she should have called earlier, but just didn't feel that she should break the news. So

when she called she was reluctant to talk. She didn't want to talk to me at all. But I insisted that she give me the message. Whatever it was, I could take it. She did, I wrote down what she told me. As I sat there, I suddenly divided into two different people. One was handling the phone. The other was standing off telling the others what to do, or helping me to keep myself under control. And this second person told me you don't have time to cry now- you might not have time to cry tomorrow. You can't cry at any time. Don't worry about that because there's something you've got to do. There are a whole lot of people out there that are going to do the crying for you. If I should even cry the rest of my life there wouldn't be enough tears for Emmett Till. For Emmett Till was just an ordinary boy like your ordinary boys and girls you have here. He had made his mark in a way because his heart was generous and the people in the neighborhood liked him. He was a well-mannered child. He wasn't on a higher level than anybody else. He was just Mr. John Doe. Emmett Louis Till, an American. He didn't realize that because he was colored, he was at disadvantage. He had been taught that you are what you are taught to be and what you make yourself because that's the way I had trained him. He never guessed that a "yes" or a "no" answer would cost him his life. When I found out that Emmett had been discovered, we got ourselves together, held ourselves in check a little while, and started making those other calls back in Mississippi. To our surprise, we found out that it wasn't going to be an easy job to get his body shipped back there. The sheriff at Money had ordered my uncle Mose to immediately bury that body. He had also called a colored undertaker who rushed to the scene with a box, a box covered with some gray flannel material. They picked up that body from the river bank and threw it in that box. They hauled it away to the cemetery. He started making telephone calls down to Money. They had promised that they would let my uncle know if they happened to find Bo, or if any word came through about him. But somehow they forgot to do that. He had the presence of mind to get a sheriff and go down there. By the time he got there, the funeral had been preached and two men were digging a grave to

bury my son's body. He told them they should have to stop. "I have to take that body up north". The sheriff was rather surprised or maybe he wasn't. I don't know what the situation was at the time. But my uncle had the presence of mind to call a white undertaker and ask him if he would handle that body, embalm it, and fix it for the shipment. The colored undertaker told my uncle "I'll tell you the truth. I don't dare let that anybody stay in my establishment over night". He said if he did, "I wouldn't have any place in the morning and perhaps I wouldn't be alive in the morning". The white undertaker looked at him and shook his head and said, "I'll do the best the best I can with one provision. I'll handle this body and prepare it for shipment provided you promise me that this seal will never be broken and that nobody will ever review that body". My uncle didn't have time to stand up there and argue with anybody about anything. He agreed. And he had every intention of carrying out that promise. When I met that body at the station that fatal Friday morning, I was overcome with grief. To think that I had sent a fine fourteen- year- old boy to Money, Mississippi, to spend an innocent two week vacation and at the end of seven days, he came back to me in a pine box. That was enough to make anybody cry. Well, we went on to the undertaker's parlor. Mr. Rainer picked up the body and escorted us to the establishment. We waited while he opened the casket. He came to me and said, "Now, Mrs. Bradley, I want to talk to you. As a friend of the family, I would advise you not to open that box." I said, "Mr. Rainer, I'm sorry, that's all that I will ever be able to do for Bo right now is to look at him and pay my last respects." I said if I die, it doesn't make any difference. I don't have too much to live for anyway.

So Mr. Rainer looked at me and he shook his head and said, "Well, if that's the way you want it, that's the way it'll have to be". So with my father on one side, and my friend on the other we made few steps to that casket. The first thing that greeted us when we walked into the parlor was a terrible odor. I think I'll carry that odor with me to my grave. But out of the newspaper accounts and all the other stories I had heard I wasn't prepared for what I saw. When I got up to that casket and looked over in

there, something happened to me that is akin to getting religion. I have seen people shout. I have seen them jerk. I have seen them lose control of themselves and be very happy. And then again I've seen them very sad. But it hit me from the head and feet at the same time. And it met in the middle and straightened me up. I looked at my arms because it felt that every bone had turned to steel. I wanted to know was the change physical, was it noticeable. Then after examining myself, I looked in the casket again, and I said, "Oh my God!"

What I saw looked like it came from outer space. It didn't look anything that we could dream, imagine in a funny book or any place else. It just didn't look like it was for real. And I had to stand up there and find my boy. I couldn't find him for five minutes, because that was not the Emmett I had sent to Mississippi. The first thing that struck my attention was a big gash in his forehead. It was big enough for me to stick my hands through. I said they must have done this with an ax. I saw something that I imagine was his brains down there. Then I looked over here and I saw a gash that was so large you could look right through and tell that every tooth in the back had been knocked out. And Emmett left home with a beautiful set of teeth I ever seen. I had worried with those teeth and bothered him about them. I would have known his teeth anywhere. But Emmett didn't have any back teeth at all, he just had about 6 perhaps, right across the front. I could tell because his mouth had been chocked open. His tongue was out. His lips were twisted and his teeth were bared just like a snarling dog's. And I said, "Oh my God!" I had to keep calling on him in order to stand there. And then I looked at his nose. There was another hole. I notice that somebody had the nerve to put a bullet in his brain. I wondered why they wasted a bullet because surely it wasn't necessary. I stopped then, and put all of these pieces together, and it wasn't actually an easy job. But after I looked to them one by one, I said that's Emmett's nose, the bottom part here, you couldn't mistake that. And I said, that's forehead, because it was very prominent. And I looked at his one eye over here, that was bulging out. His eyes were very light in color, and I said that certainly is

his eye. And then I looked over here it seemed that the right eye had been picked out with a nut picker, so I couldn't really go by that.

I decided to examine his ears because he had very large ears, larger than an ordinary person. That's when I found out that part of the ear was gone, and the entire back of the head had been knocked out. I said, "Mr. Rainer, I can't see very well". I said, "Will you take this body out of this box and let me look at the left-hand side, because it's not too much to go by on the right-hand side?" and the man really looked at me like I was crazy. He just shook his head and said you sit down and I'll do it, but I'd rather for you to go home and come back".

I said, "All right, I'll do that. I'll bring you some clothes to put on Bo" because they didn't dressed him. He was covered in white powder when he got here, because nobody was to see him anyway. I sent the clothes to the parlor and went back a little while later. Mr. Rainer had laid the body out on a slab. That's when I walked around on the left-hand side of him and looked. It looked as if somebody had taken a criss- cross knife and gone insane on the left side of his face. It was beat into a pulp.

I told Mr. Reiner, if you will have the wake here, I said I would like for as many people to walk in here and see this thing as want to come. As long as we cover these things up, they're going to keep on happening. I said, I'm pulling the id off of this one. nothing else worse than this could ever happen to me- my personal feelings don't matter, it's those other boys and girls out there that we're going to have to look out for. And the more people that walk by Emmett and look at what happened to this fourteen-year-old boy, the more people will be interested in what happen to their children. Now, maybe, I didn't say those exact words. I doubt if I did. But I do know that I wanted the world to see what had happened to my boy.

We went on home and we had our funeral Saturday as we had planned. While the body was at the funeral parlor, they tell me that fifty thousand people walked by that night. They had to close the parlor up at 1:30 a.m. because windows were being broken and the place was just in a shambles. You couldn't move traffic for blocks around. I asked Reverend Roberts if

he would be good enough to let me move the body to his church and have the funeral there. Reverend Roberts said yes. Not only that, he said, "I will open doors so that people can continue the wake until the time of the funeral". We went in there Saturday and had our funeral and there were so many people locked outside of that church. I guess they must have stood for eight blocks or more.

I told Reverend Roberts the funeral isn't over until the remains have been viewed. If you will let us have our funeral and go home, you tell those people out there they won't be turned away, they can see, too. Reverend Roberts was very cooperative. He said, "Yes, Mrs. Bradley. I'll throw these doors open twenty-four hours a day. I said if we don't bury him today, which was Saturday, we can't bury Sunday or Monday, because it's a holiday. I figured on Tuesday we would proceed to the cemetery. Those people walked twenty- four hours a day. They walked for blocks. They were six abreast and I'm told that the traffic was tied up from Saturday afternoon until Tuesday at the close of the funeral. People were interested. They wanted to know what was happening- one would go out and tell another more than 600.00 people looked at Emmett Louis (Bobo) Till.

When they walked in that church, they had one feeling. But when they looked down the casket, they got another. Men fainted and women fainted. I'm told that one out of every ten went to their knees and had to be carried out. Those 600.00 people were stirred up so much until the newspapers in Chicago got stirred to. And other people became stirred. And that's why you're here tonight, because they reached you. We went back to the church on Tuesday and took Emmett to the cemetery.

We have a little town near Chicago, called Argo. And that's where Emmett was practically born and raised. The people out there, the school system and everything, is mostly white. You might find five or six colored children in a class of 130 pupils in high school. You might find eight or nine children in a class of forty in the grade school. The children out there don't realize that I'm black and you're white. That's where I was educated incidentally. I never discovered I was colored until I was pretty big girl. I

just didn't know. It hadn't occurred to me that I was darker than some of the other people that were in the class. I was graded strictly according to my ability to perform and I was never looked down on

For that reason I cherish my white friends and my colored friends, because I have no reason to be standoffish or to feel inferior to any of them. They treated me the way I treated them. These schools in Argo, Illinois, turned out en masse. Every school, public and Catholic, in Argo, Summit, and Bedford Park turned out to pay tribute to Emmett Louis Till. Most of the people didn't know Emmett. Just a few of them did. Not only that, but the police and everybody cooperated to the fullest extent. We had one-hundred-police escort to the cemetery. They stopped transportation. They stopped everything to let Emmett Till's body be moved. When we got to the cemetery, there were approximately fifty or more cars waiting. I'm sure that there were two hundred in the procession that left Chicago. Not only did they take us there on an uninterrupted journey, but they brought us back to my door the same way.

I had the privilege of hearing Adam Clayton Powell speak several nights ago, and I listened to him tell about the situation existing over in Africa and other places. He said those people have decided they're going to have freedom regardless of the amount of blood they have to spill. You can't scare a man whose life expectancy is only twenty-eight years. In some countries that's as long as they expect to live. They're starved to death, they're hungry and everything else. How can you scare them with an atom bomb or a hydrogen bomb? There some a time when you get beyond fear-fear doesn't mean anything. You're going to die one way or the other so you might as well die fighting. So, those poor ignorant people over there have stood up and asserted themselves. They have said we are going to die trying to do better- we're not going to just sit here and waste away or idle away and let somebody kick us around till we die. And they have gotten very good results.

If those ignorant unlearned people can stand up and take a stand, how can we who have been exposed to education, exposed to all of the good things,

sit down and let somebody just walk up and say here's a Cadillac. I think you deserve it, you've waited patiently for it. When you wanted it, you went out and worked pretty hard.

I think that my freedom is worth more to me than a Cadillac, because if I have the Cadillac and can't drive it, I don't need it anyway. I have invested a son in freedom and I'm determined that his death isn't in vain. When I was talking to God and pleading with Him and asking why did You let it be my boy, it was as if He spoke to me and said: "Without the shedding of innocent blood, no cause is won". And I turned around then and thanked God that He felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause. I don't say that I'm not regretting it, I don't say that I'm accepting it gleefully or happily. It's a terrible thing to have to accept, but still I'm glad that He made me able to accept it. And also I have stopped, I wondered, and even asked myself how am I making it; how am I doing the things that I am doing, why is it that I'm still in my right mind? The answer always comes back to me that there is a God up there. He's looking down here. My constant prayer through this ordeal hasn't been so much for myself. I haven't prayed too much for Mamie, because I thing God's looking out after me. But I have prayed for Him rather to keep me aware of what I am doing and why I am doing it. Don't let me get my feet off the ground, my head way up in the air and just start thinking that I an great because there are no great people really. We are only as great as the least one can become. We're going to have to stop worrying about am I too good to associate with you, or this and that and the other. Instead we are all going to realize that we are all very, very small. We are tiny as individuals. But together we can't be beat. It we stand up and unite ourselves together for a common cause, there is nothing that can stand before us- not just colored people but white people altogether. The colored people can't do it by themselves and the white can't do it by themselves.

As long as we are awakening, I don't think we're going to stand to be held back. I don't believe that the average good, white person wants up to be held back. We can read where our race has contributed innumerable things

to the progress of America. Without that rich resource to be tapped and things that we are able to contribute, American herself would not be as great as she is. So I want to stand up now and I want you to stand up, too, and demand our place. Then after we get it, walk in it and respect. We'll have to be very dignified. The day is gone that we're nobodies; we are all somebodies, and together, I can't tell you how great we are as somebodies. I would like to touch briefly on the trial in Mississippi. The Mississippi trial was really an ordeal. When I started down there, I'm not going to tell anybody I was brave and raring to go. If there had been any other way, I don't think I would have gone. And without the people and the press standing behind me, I still probably would not have made it. My father came from Detroit, my mother was in Chicago already. She was telling me, she said, if you go it will be over my dead body. Other relatives and friends were calling up and saying please don't go. I was convinced that I shouldn't go, but then I had a dream, and it seemed like to me my place was in Mississippi, that I had more business in Mississippi than anybody down there.

I called my father in Detroit the day before I was getting ready to leave and I said Dad, we're going to Mississippi. He said, "What?" I said, yes, we're going tomorrow, so get here as quickly as you can, and if you're here by a certain time, we'll leave together, if not, I'll have to go without you. I don't think I would have left though until he got there. When we first mentioned Mississippi, we got so much response until I knew we would just have to hire an Illinois Central train to take all the people to Mississippi.

But about three hours before plane time, we started making calls to check on the people who wanted to go. Suddenly so many ailments cropped up. There were ingrown toenails and migraine headaches. The Chicago police department said it had no jurisdiction. They couldn't send anybody. Detective agencies with big strong detectives weren't authorized to go to Mississippi. So I looked around. I said, well, it's just me and my dad and Mr. Mooty. I said we'll take God and will be enough. So that's the way we

flew to Memphis, Tennessee. And He was there, because we could feel Him in the plane. He was there.

We got there. We went on down to Mississippi. It was the second day of the trial and it was just about ten o'clock in the morning, when we got to the courtroom. I was surprised to see the number of colored people milling around there. I had thought maybe their bosses would have told them that they better not go to the trial. But they were there. When we got out of the car, I noticed that there were several television outfits there. There were the newsmen and they were looking for us, and they were right there on guard to see to it, to watch us with the eyes of the camera, to see to it that nothing happened.

When we walked into the courtroom, the judge had made the announcement that if anybody took any pictures, they would have be thrown out. But when we walked in there, those white reporters, and those colored reporters, evidently forgot what the judge said, because they stood on chairs, they stood on tables, they stood on railings, even on one another, and took the pictures. So the trial had to be recessed.

We can have another recess down in Mississippi. If we let them know that they are not going to lynch people, they are not going to make slaves of our men and women down there. We can have another recess, and it can be just as effective as the one when I walked in the courtroom.

The settled down and they had what they called the trial. Little vendors were going around selling cases of pop.

Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant went to the washroom unescorted without handcuffs. They had their children on their laps and they spanked them playfully. They hugged their wives and kissed their mothers. They were just privileged characters. Than we had this jury that looked alike, well I just can't really tell you what they looked alike. But the way that they looked at us, you'd have thought we came from outer space.

The big question in their mind was, what business did we have down there. It was Mississippi's problem and Mississippi was going to handle it. But without the newspapers and the press news agencies, there never would

have been a trial in Mississippi. That was forced on them. It was bitter gall in their mouths. They even released an article to the citizens around there. I won't worry to quote it. In substance it meant that we know that you're being tried. We know that this is getting under your skin, but for God's sake try to take it. You have a right to get up and blow somebody's head off in you want to because they are certainly down here disrupting your life. but just wait two days: we'll have this over, and you can just go right on back to lynching and doing whatever you want to do. That was just the feeling of the whole town. We knew that they were only holding off, because they didn't dare latch on.

After the summaries were made, it wasn't hard to tell within a few days which way the trial was going. In fact when we got there, the prosecutor told me Tuesday that we should have it over by Wednesday afternoon. What they hadn't figured on was that Dr. T. R. M. Howard, the NAACP, and the colored press were going to get together and dig up some more witness. They hadn't figured on that at all. But those people went around down there and got this information. On Tuesday evening, they told the District Attorney that they had eye witness to this murder and they would like to have the court recess until they could produce them. Tuesday and Friday they went on the stand. Little Willie Reed stood up there and told he saw Emmett Till in the back of a truck that Mr. Milam was in. he describes how there were four white men in the cab and four colored men in the back. One of these four colored people, he said, was my boy. He was sitting in the floor of the truck. He recognized him from a picture that he saw in the newspaper. He said that he saw this truck because he had gotten up early that Sunday morning to go and get himself some cigarettes. Well I don't think God necessary teaches us to smoke. I think it might have been God's will that Willie Reed run out of cigarettes and just happened to want to get up at six o'clock Sunday morning and go to the store. Willie Reed saw Mr. Bryant when he got out of the truck, and drive away. It just happened that Willie Reed lived on the farm of Mr. Milam's brother. So he went on back to his hose and when he got to the house, he

saw the truck was there. And he also heard a lot on noise out of the barn. He heard a voice screaming. He heard a boy crying for his life, calling for his mother and calling on God. He heard him begging for mercy and he heard the blows that were being struck on the boy. Willie Reed asked a friend, "who is that they're beating up over there", but he didn't know. So Willie came back to a pump, which was approximately four hundred feet from where the beating was going on. He also saw Mr. Milam walk up to the pump with a gun still around his waist. It was the same gun he had when he went to my uncle's house and took the boy out of bed. He saw that man and recognized him. He even spoke to him. Mr. Milam went back to the barn. They tell me that this confusion must have lasted about an hour or better. Pretty soon there was no more noise. They pulled this tractor out of this barn. When the truck came out, there were only four white men in the cab. There were no colored people to be seen. I know what happened to one of those colored people. There was a tarpaulin over the back of the truck.

We don't know how long they were in there. Maybe it was one, maybe it was two hours, maybe it was more. But for the life of me I don't see how Emmett Till could have screamed that long because any one of those blows on his head would have surely killed him. But then I imagine the body can take a lot of punishment. And his body was badly beaten, and because the skin even popped and rolled off, the second skin was all that was left on Emmett's body.

After little Willie Reed got up on that stand, he was questioned by the prosecuting attorney. It was then the need for desegregation really stood forth. Willie Reed had a story, but he couldn't tell it. It was locked inside of him. It would have taken education to put the key in the lock and turn it loose. Every word that was gotten from Willie Reed had to be pulled out word by word. That's because Willie is eighteen years old and has probably been to school only three years. What he learned in school was not enough really to have gone to the trouble to go there every day.

That's why you are going to have to integrate those schools and make it possible for those children to talk and know what they see and be able to tell it. When the defense got up and questioned Willie, they tore his story all apart. He didn't even know how far he was from the barn. They said, well, would you say you were five thousand feet? Little Willie would say "yes, I guess so", but he didn't know how far five thousand feet were. We all know that you can't see anything from that distance. But they didn't ask him five hundred feet, five feet, or yards. No, they put it at the impossible distance, because they knew that Little Willie wouldn't be able to defend himself.

They threw that testimony out. Little Willie Reed was not a good witness. He was standing too far away. Moses Wright said that the men walked in his house, took the boy out of the ben. The defense got up, they said that anybody could have walked in Moses Wright's house and said Mr. Preacher, let me in, this is Mr. Bryant. Perhaps Mr. Bryant had an enemy who was playing a joke on him. And so far as Mr. Milam is concerned, there are a lot of tall, fat, baldheaded men in Mississippi, and it didn't necessary to be him.

In other words they were saying that Mose Wright was too big a fool to know he saw come in his house. So that tore that testimony down. When I got up on the stand, they realized immediately that I wasn't exactly a fool. Then they turned around and made a very bad person out of me. They questioned me as to the insurance I had, and then they proved to the satisfaction of that jury, that I sent Bobo down there and had Uncle Mose get him killed, so I could collect the insurance. And the jury was satisfied. The explanation pleased them very much. Well I had a ten-cent policy and a fifteen-cent policy and I don't think that's enough to bury him. Well, the trial proceeded. The men said they took Emmett and that they questioned Emmett. He wasn't the right boy, so they turned him loose. Yet and still Emmett Till has never turned up at home. I had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that was my son. The ring that he had on his finger was the one the Army sent me with his father's personal effects. The ring was made in

Casablanca and there was only one of that kind because it was a handmade ring.

They did give Moses Wright credit for being smart after all. They said that Mose, being a preacher recognized the possibility of starting something when Emmett was taken from his house. But knowing that Emmett was going to be turned loose up the road a piece, he rushed out and met him. That perhaps he knocked him in the head, threw him in the bushes or buried him or maybe, he put him on the train and sent him home. Then he took this ring off Bo's finger and contacted the NAACP down there. They got together and went out in the Tallahatchie River and got them a body, put this ring on the finger, put this gin mill fan around the neck and dropped it over there very conveniently so that they could find it a few days later.

And you'd be surprised how the jury fell for that story. It was just a plot to disgrace Mississippi. But they didn't try to explain whose body it was. It seems that bodies are pretty plentiful down there. And the only point that they were trying to prove is that the body that I had did not belonged to me. The county doctor took the stand. He said that when he went down to the river bank and examined the body, h couldn't tell if it was a colored or a white man. Then the sheriff stood up on the stand. He couldn't tell if it was a colored or a white men. Yet and still he called a colored undertaker. The man was black enough for nobody to wonder if he was white or black. You might not know it, but down in Mississippi you don't call a lolored undertaker to handle a white body. If there is any doubt in your mind whatsoever, you call a white undertaker because white man or black man gat his brains blown out if he makes the mistake of giving a white corpse to a colored undertaker. That you just don't do.

Well, another mistake that Mississippi made. They held the inquest. They sent me three death certificates signed by the same doctor that couldn't tell whether the body was that of a colored or white man. He testified that Emmett Louis Till had died on such and such date, "colored", age fourteen, born the 25th of July, 1941, in Chicago, Illinois. There was the

paper in black and white that this was my body. They sent me the death certificate. The insurance policy paid off on the basis of those death certificates. Yet and still when we got down to the Mississippi trial, it couldn't possibly be my boy. I think they should be a little more careful before they start signing these death certificates. But I knew because I stood up there and looked. I found what I was looking for.

Somebody has to sacrifice for a cause. With the sacrifice of a few of our automobiles and some of our fine clothes, we can make this world one that we'll be proud of. I don't think that freedom is so far away that we are not going to enjoy it. I think that pretty soon this thing is going to be over. In fact, it's over now, we just haven't realized it. The tooth has been pulled out, but the jaw is still swollen. It's just a matter of time before it's going to go down. If we all get together and support the NAACP, that has fought so hard to make things come to where they are now, then I do believe that we are right over the hill to victory. Pray for me, pray for your organization and above all, don't forget the NAACP.

Thank you.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴Houch D. W., Dixon D. E., *“Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965”*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009, Kindle Edition, pos. 482-581.

N. 4: Ella Baker, December 1963, SNCC conference, Washington, D.C.

I suppose it must be an indication of my growing old, I actually get affected by such applause. I almost lose my sense of balance and want to sort act like a female and cry, I don't know whether that's good or bad for me.

I had not anticipated having anything to say, and I think it's very gracious of Jim (Foreman) to not only call on me, but to indicate that what SNCC is, is the result of what the people are who are in the SNCC. And SNCC if it is anything different from any of the rest of the group that have come on the scene, I hope is different in two aspects in particular: one is, it is concerned with not the development of a leader, but the development of leadership. And there's a lot of single individuals as leaders and the development of leadership, with leadership concepts, leadership goals, leadership methods that people can follow after we have moved on, and must all move on from one point to the other.

I think it's different in that respect; it's also different in the respect that it goes into the hardcore area and identifies very closely with people. It works with people. It lives with people. And it has had to do this especially in the areas where it worked, because there they found- and we all know this, if we hadn't know it, we should know it- that in order to get people in deep areas of the South to move, to even act in their own behalf, they have to first be given a feeling of confidence in you, and then this gives them the feeling of confidence so that they can break through the years of fear and suppression that they have experienced. And this I think SNCC has done a good pioneering job in, setting the place for others to follow. I think if we are to move forward we have to also combine that other thing that I hope will become very unique with us and which was conceived in the beginning, namely that we bring to bear on the problems of race, the problems of human suffering, not only our own emotional righteous indignation with the situation, but we use the full capacities of our thinking and our minds to actually think through and to chart programs that people

can respond to and programs that have basic effect on changing the system so people can live instead of just exist.

I wish that we had time tonight, not tonight, but certainly during the conference to analyze further that which Bob Moses set before us this morning. And if we don't do it now, we've got to do it as a staff, because we have reached the point that the old line methods of just getting out in a demonstration just for the sake of demonstrating is far from being enough. And we've got to find ways in which to involve people at many different levels. And we've got to find ways in which to evaluate our own selves in respect to the movement. Frequently we don't find time to look at ourselves. And this is one of the reasons why, today, when Mr. Baldwin made the statement to the effect that the white man, in order to find his role in the movement, he would have to forget that he's white. I think we also have to forget that we are Negroes as such. But we forget that only in terms of not trying to feel that the white fellow who comes into our movement has to come by us. Now I can understand, as we grow in our own strength and as we flex our muscles of leadership, and flex our muscles that have come from seeing how effective we are, we can begin to feel that the other fellow should come through us. But this is not the way to create a new world. We can only create a new world out of a commonness of purpose and a decent respect for all the people who are helping to contribute to it.

I don't think we need to be afraid.

Certainly we don't need to be afraid of being taken over, if we know where we're going, know why we are going there, and then know how we're going to get there.

I suppose if I'd wanted to speak, I could have been shorter. But since I didn't want to speak- no, I don't think I should, Jim, no, I got some other things we can talk about later- but maybe before the conference is over we can have an opportunity to talk some. But certainly we ought to begin to think very seriously about the directions in which we are going and assume the responsibility that has been laid on our shoulders as a result of the fact

that, whether we like it or not, we have been able to pioneer in a direction that had not been pioneered before.

When you talked about a movement on Mississippi, you called it MOM. I remember those days. And I remember the fact that we didn't move on Mississippi when we thought we were going to move on Mississippi. But I also remember that you didn't forget to dream, that you didn't forget it, and that when Bob Moses went down into McComb, Mississippi, and inspired such people as Brenda Travis, who is here somewhere- I don't know whether she is here or not in the audience- but inspired the high school students of Mc Comb, Mississippi. And when out of this came some other people, and when you began to come to the conferences, and no longer were there ten or twelve people who were on the staff, but there were twenty, and there were thirty, and then there's now over a hundred people, people who come to the staff because they feel it offers some opportunity to find some greater meaning in life and an opportunity to help provide... [break in tape].

He said, "I been wondering what keeps you going?" And afterwards I thought about it myself. What is it that keeps people who have been going as long as I have trying to keep going? I think one of the things that keeps one going is a faith in human beings. Basically I believe human want to live in a decent world. Basically I believe that the young people of today really are out to create that kind of world. And if I didn't believe that there would be no virtue in my living, because I cannot see any virtue even in using one's creative instinct, one's creative capacities, if we cannot create a world in which people can live, then we haven't done anything.

When I was much younger, I used to make speeches that were much better rounded, and one of them had to do with this subject: that to penetrate the mystery of life and to perfect the mastery of life were the twin goals of great living. At that time, and I suppose I can still say now, we have done much in the direction of penetrating the mystery of life. With all this equipment we have around us, it is part of the penetration of the mystery of life. And when we hear about the Talstar and all of the marvelous things

of science- the computer machines and all of these things- this is part of the penetration of the mystery of life. But where we have failed, and failed so woefully, is the perfection of the mystery of life. And there can be no perfection of the mastery of life until we have learned that human beings are human beings worthy of the dignity and respect wherever they are, irrespective of who they are.

And as Jim Foreman pointed out today, what we think of others, we can so easily become. And this is a danger for us. When we look at these irrational people, and we know they're irrational, when we see as I happened to have seen about the 3st October, four young white men who trailed us from Natchez, Mississippi, to Port Gibson, and then jumped out of their car and vented their spleen on Bruce Payne, a young graduate student at Yale University. Why did they find it necessary to do this? Why do they find it necessary to take out their venom on somebody else? Because somewhere, somehow, they have been fooled. And you and I know great deal of why they have been fooled. And they have been fooled and made to feel that they had something of value in being white. And deep down inside of them they knew this was not true, that they knew that just being white was not enough, and so they are confused and they don't know where to turn. And so when we gaze upon these people, we gaze upon them not with a sense of despising them, or even rejecting them, or being overcritical of them, but being understanding of what has made them into what they are. And part of our task, as I see it, is to help them to see that they can be something other than that, and I don't know whether it comes through nonviolence or not, but it certainly comes through an understanding of your own value, so that you do not feel it necessary to lord it over somebody else just because you have the opportunity to do so. These things may be very elementary, but I think they are basic tot what we become and how well we carry the torch that has been handed to us.

I am glad to see so many people in SNCC that I don't know them. But I do hope, that whoever we are, and wherever we are, that we will continue to think in terms of the fact that what we do in SNCC is not for the

development of SNCC as a big, powerful organization, nor for getting headlines. But we do this because we believe that it is necessary to change the political and social system of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and yes to change the political and social system in respect to the entire country. So that when we say we have a democratic country and when we claim that we're a nation for the people and by the people, it will truly be a people's nation and a people's government. And this can only be if the people themselves understand how valuable they are, and understand what it takes to become a nation of the people. And we have the opportunity to help the people understand this, and understand it in a way and in a depth that we perhaps haven't even begun to find the final depth for. But I think this is an opportunity and I'm glad that I'm here tonight.

The three years from '30 to '63, out of my fifty-odd years, seems to me to be the best years of my life. I hope I have three more to be with you.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Houch D. W., Dixon D. E., *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009, Kindle Edition, pos. 3844- 3905.

Abstract

In questa tesi intitolata *When a movement becomes gendered: women of the Civil Rights Movement. Life and Actions of Septima Clark and Ella Baker* ho cercato di riportare alla memoria il ruolo fondamentale che le donne hanno avuto all'interno del Movimento per i diritti civili degli Afro-Americani, focalizzando la mia analisi su due figure principali: Septima Clark e Ella Baker.

La principale motivazione che ha causato la scomparsa nella memoria storica delle loro azioni è da ricondurre al fatto che la società americana presenta gravi disparità di genere.

Se durante la seconda Guerra Mondiale le donne erano spinte a uscire dalle loro abitazioni e quindi, anche, dai ruoli tradizionali che ricoprivano in ambito lavorativo (segretaria, insegnante), e spronate a dare il loro contributo allo sforzo bellico del paese lavorando nelle fabbriche che producevano gli armamenti che venivano, poi, inviati al fronte, o prestando servizio presso qualche comparto militare, le cose cambiarono quando la Guerra, finalmente finì, e gli uomini tornarono a casa.

In un'epoca in cui le cure per il disturbo post-traumatico da stress erano poco conosciute, si pensò che il modo migliore per far reintegrare gli ex-combattenti nella società fosse quello di ricreare le condizioni societarie dell'avanti-guerra. Ai soldati furono favoriti prestiti e assicurazioni in modo tale che potessero comprare casa e ritornare a una vita tranquilla. La nascita degli oramai classici sobborghi residenziali, tipicamente statunitensi, è da ricondurre, proprio, a queste condizioni. Nel progetto di ricostruzione societaria post-bellica si rese necessaria l'estremizzazione del ruolo della donna che divenne quasi un essere mitologico, fragile e insicuro, necessitante della protezione del proprio uomo, fratello, o padre. Questa insicurezza, insita nel genere femminile, rendeva la donna incapace di prendere ogni tipo di decisione. Si credè, così, l'immagine tipica della casalinga degli anni '50, ovvero quella di una donna perfetta ben vestita, pettinata e truccata il cui unico scopo nella vita era quello di prendersi cura dei propri figli e della casa, mentre aspettava che venisse sera e con essa anche il marito.

Questa condizione femminile peggiorava di gran lunga per le donne afro-americane le quali venivano doppiamente discriminate in quanto donne appartenenti ad una “razza” inferiore secondo gli standard dell’”illuminata” società americana. La percentuale delle lavoratrici afro-americane si ridusse, come la cultura bianca imponeva, con l’unica differenza che la capacità di acquisto dei neri era ben diversa da quella dei bianchi, motivo per il quale le donne erano costrette a vivere nei ghetti, o comunque in sobborghi urbani caratterizzati da povertà. La donna nera era, inoltre, incaricata di sollevare lo spirito del compagno dai continui insulti della controparte bianca.

Dato il contesto generale è facile capire perché le donne, impegnate nella “battaglia” per i diritti civili non ottennero mai un giusto riconoscimento: semplicemente non incarnavano il prototipo femminile dell’epoca.

In verità le donne furono essenziali per il Movimento, e, malgrado, la loro leadership non sia mai stata riconosciuta molte delle vittorie ottenute nel campo dei diritti civili non sarebbero avvenute se le donne (prevalentemente) afro-americane non avessero partecipato. Tutte le principali organizzazioni quali la NAACP, il MIA, la SCLC e , in parte anche l’SNCC erano caratterizzati da una forte leadership maschile che vedeva le donne, solamente, come delle attiviste incaricate di ricoprire i ruoli tradizionali. Principalmente le donne nelle organizzazioni per i diritti civili erano solite essere segretarie di qualche leader o erano incaricate di raccogliere fondi per le campagne.

Questa visione, non solo riprendeva le usanze dei bianchi ma anche la struttura della chiesa battista, che era il principale coordinatore delle attività della maggior parte delle organizzazioni come nel caso della NAACP, del MIA e della SCLC, nelle quali le donne non potevano ricoprire altri ruoli se non quelli di procacciatrici di fondi e/o di segretarie.

Per sopperire a questa mancanza di leadership, Belinda Robnett, studiosa e attivista afro-americana, ha coniato il termine *bridge leader* con il quale ha inteso sottolineare il fondamentale “ruolo di ponte” e quindi di collegamento che le donne hanno ricoperto tra il centro e la periferia, ovvero tra la leadership e la popolazione rurale. I contadini, e in generale la classe povera, non si sarebbero mai fidati di qualche soggetto appartenente alla medio - alta società afro-

americana, che non aveva alcuna conoscenza delle comunità in cui voleva inserirsi e soprattutto del livello di segregazione di quel specifico luogo, il quale si presentava nelle loro comunità incitandoli al cambiamento. Questo perché tra il centro e la periferia non c'erano legami di fiducia, le donne si inserivano nella comunità, la vivevano, e per questo venivano credute e rispettate dalle popolazioni autoctone, non si presentavano con grandi discorsi e poi partivano alla volta della prossima conferenza, restavano nei luoghi e aiutavano le persone a partire dalle semplici cose come leggere o scrivere una lettera per loro conto, a quelle più complicate come insegnare a questi soggetti affinché tramite la scrittura e la lettura potessero aumentare le proprie conoscenze riguardanti i loro diritti. Solo partendo da legami di fiducia con esponenti locali delle principali organizzazioni, la popolazione avrebbe potuto fidarsi dei loro leader.

Le donne non possono e non devono essere considerate solamente come dei connettori, in quanto molte di loro diedero inizio a degli eventi che si conclusero con una vittoria per l'intero Movimento. Questo, ad esempio, è il caso di Rosa Parks e Jo Ann Robinson che diedero il via al boicottaggio dei bus a Montgomery. Contrariamente all'opinione generale non fu Martin Luther King a organizzare la protesta ma un gruppo di donne, il *Women's Political Council (WPC)*, del quale Parks e Robinson facevano parte. Quando il primo dicembre 1955 Rosa Parks fu arrestata per essersi rifiutata di cedere il proprio posto a un uomo bianco in un autobus di linea, Jo Ann Robinson, e l'intero WPC cominciarono a stampare centinaia di volantini, che poi distribuirono per tutta Montgomery finché ogni nero non fu messo a conoscenza dell'ultimo avvenimento e incitato a non usufruire dei mezzi di trasporto pubblici fintanto che la segregazione (perlomeno negli autobus di linea) non fosse terminata. Il boicottaggio cominciò il 5 dicembre 1955 e si protrasse fino al 21 dicembre dell'anno successivo. In questo periodo Martin Luther King diventò il leader principale del Movimento, grazie ai suoi discorsi, e sicuramente aiutò durante la protesta, ma non fu lui a idealizzarla né tantomeno a iniziarla.

La disparità di genere divenne chiara ai più durante la Marcia su Washington del 1963 quando più di 500.000 persone marciarono pacificamente su Washington. Benché tutti i leader, o cosiddetti tali, donne incluse si sedettero sul palco, nessuna

donna parlò, anzi durante la marcia, poiché erano state invitate a camminare per Pennsylvania Avenue assieme alle mogli dei leader, decisero di dar vita a una marcia parallela nella quale avanzarono per Independence Avenue per poi confluire nel gruppo principale presso il Lincoln Memorial.

Due delle maggiori attiviste che contribuirono allo sviluppo del Movimento furono Septima Poinsette Clark e Ella Baker, le quali attraverso l'educazione permisero che la base democratica del Movimento si ampliasse.

Septima Poinsette Clark nacque a Charleston, nella Carolina del Sud, nel 1892. Figlia di un ex schiavo che non imparò mai né a leggere né a scrivere e di un'afro-americana nata libera, di discendenze native, fu introdotta dalla madre al mestiere di insegnante, in quanto tale occupazione era considerata adatta ad una donna non sposata. All'epoca la Carolina del Sud impegnava ben poche risorse nell'educazione degli Afro-Americani i quali frequentavano solo i primi anni di scuola, e a Charleston il regime segregazionista imponeva che nelle scuole pubbliche potessero insegnare solamente maestre bianche che per la maggior parte dei casi si vergognavano di insegnare agli Afro-Americani e passavano le loro lezioni spiegando ai bambini quanto i bianchi fossero superiori ai neri. La poca propensione all'insegnamento ai bambini di colore congiuntamente all'affollamento delle aule che potevano essere composte anche da un centinaio di bambini, riduceva ulteriormente le possibilità di apprendimento.

Le insegnanti afro-americane potevano insegnare solamente nelle zone rurali della contea di Charleston, ma non in città.

Nel 1916 Clark cominciò a insegnare nell'isola di Johns Island, dove oltre a riscontrare oggettive condizioni di povertà e difficoltà di insegnamento causate da un elevato grado di assenteismo degli studenti, i quali erano costretti a lavorare, si rese conto che i genitori, che nelle zone rurali erano soliti affidarsi alle insegnanti, le quali li aiutavano nelle faccende burocratiche di routine, dovevano in qualche modo essere educati.

Negli anni successivi partecipò a diverse campagne proposte dalle organizzazioni di cui faceva parte, le più importanti delle quali furono la lotta che l'NAACP intraprese nel 1919 contro il dipartimento scolastico di Charleston affinché le insegnanti afro-americane ricevessero l'autorizzazione all'insegnamento (anche

nella zona urbana) e la campagna per l'equalizzazione dei salari, anche questa intrapresa dell'NAACP nella prima metà degli anni '40.

Precedentemente, nel 1935 Clark aveva cominciato a insegnare presso la Gray's Richland Adult School, dove ottimizzò le sue competenze nell'istruzione della popolazione adulta. Questa scuola seguiva un processo pedagogico ben definito che poi Clark applicò nei progetti dell'Highlander Folk School e del Citizenship Program. Per prima cosa gli studenti dovevano imparare a scrivere il loro nome su un pezzo di cartone cosa che gli avrebbe indotti a familiarizzare e a riconoscere i suoni delle lettere con i loro rispettivi simboli tracciati su un pezzo di carta. Successivamente, nella seconda fase, venivano forniti loro dei libretti, una sorta di sussidiario, in cui erano inserite le principali informazioni riguardanti lo stato della Carolina del Sud, qualche principio costituzionale e i diritti del cittadino.

Nel 1954, consigliata da un'altra attivista, Septima Clark partecipò a un ciclo di lezioni presso l'Highlander Folk School (HFS). Lì rimase così felicemente stupefatta dal livello di integrazione che bianchi e neri erano riusciti a creare che subito si attivò affinché un maggior numero di attivisti e insegnanti partecipassero ai prossimi progetti della scuola. L'anno successivo Septima cominciò a lavorare per l'HFS con il compito di istruire insegnanti che poi sarebbero ritornati nelle loro comunità con l'intento di aprire delle scuole, e sopperire alla mancanza di educazione. A questi cicli educativi parteciparono molti attivisti, tra i quali anche Rosa Parks che poco dopo aver partecipato a uno di questi progetti diede inizio al boicottaggio dei bus a Montgomery.

Spinti dalla corrente educativa Clark e altri due colleghi crearono in seno all'Highlander Folk School la *Citizenship Program* con l'obiettivo di aumentare la percentuale dei soggetti votanti appartenenti alla comunità afro-americana. Fu così che nel 1958, a un anno dall'apertura del programma, 600 persone si presentarono negli appositi uffici e richiesero di poter essere inseriti nel registro dei cittadini votanti.

Ben presto le ritorsioni dei segregazionisti cominciarono a farsi sentire, fino al punto che accusati di comunismo (bianchi e neri che collaboravano dovevano per forza essere dei comunisti per la mentalità segregazionista del sud) il programma

dovette chiudere poiché l'incolumità dell'intera Highlander Folk School era messa a rischio.

Martin Luther King Jr. si rese conto dell'importanza del progetto che fu riaperto presso la sua organizzazione, la SCLC, e rinominato *Citizenship Education Program* (CEP) che divenne il più importante di tutti i progetti intrapresi dalla SCLC e che dopo soli tre anni dalla sua inaugurazione portò, nel 1964, alle urne più di 50.000 afro-americani.

Se Clark fu particolarmente orgogliosa dei risultati raggiunti dal suo progetto, non lo fu altrettanto per i comportamenti tenuti dai leader della SCLC, i quali oltre a non riconoscere i suoi meriti in quanto donna, trattavano la base del Movimento con un fare di superiorità, cosa che, secondo Clark, avrebbe prima o poi portato al disfacimento del Movimento stesso.

Ella Baker nacque il 13 dicembre 1903 a Littleton, nella Carolina del Nord da Anna Ross e Blake Baker. Nonostante i genitori fossero nati liberi, i racconti sulla schiavitù narrategli dai nonni materni influenzarono fortemente la giovane Ella la quale, fin da piccola, imparò a conoscere i valori di una comunità, del rispetto e dell'eguaglianza di ognuno dei suoi componenti e dell'aiuto reciproco. Finita la scuola si trasferì ad Harlem che all'epoca era il maggior centro di riferimento per l'intera comunità afro-americana, dove entrò in contatto con soggetti appartenenti a diverse culture, cosa che la aiutò ad affinare le sue capacità critiche. A New York si dedicò all'educazione della popolazione adulta promuovendo dibattiti su qualsiasi tipo di argomento i partecipanti volessero parlare. Harlem funse da trampolino di lancio per la sua carriera: cominciò a essere socialmente attiva: iniziò a collaborare con il *Worker's Education Program* che faceva parte della *Works Progress Association*, per poi sostarsi, agli inizi degli anni '40, alla NAACP, alla SCLC nel 1957 e nel 1961 all' SNCC.

In tutte le esperienze con le organizzazioni Baker dovette combattere contro il dilagante sessismo che da esse permeava e il totale non rispetto per il principio democratico.

Il punto di rottura fu raggiunto durante la sua collaborazione con la SCLC quando il suo ruolo di leadership non fu mai riconosciuto dall'organizzazione. La famosa *Crusade for Citizenship* il cui compito fu quello di avvicinare la popolazione nera

alle urne negli stati del sud, dove questo tipo di partecipazione era impedita dalle minacce dei razzisti bianchi, fu da lei organizzata. Scrisse e parlò al telefono per giorni, attivando tutti i suoi contatti per riuscire a organizzare le conferenze in cui King avrebbe dovuto parlare e, non soddisfatta, cominciò a viaggiare per promuovere il programma.

Dopo che King subì un tentato omicidio nel 1958 Ella lo sostituì al comando dell'Organizzazione, dove oltre a portare avanti i suoi impegni istituzionali continuò la pubblicizzazione del nuovo manoscritto di King.

Malgrado il suo impegno e le sue conquiste Baker non venne mai considerata un membro attivo della Conferenza.

Con il passare dei mesi si rese conto che i problemi della SCLC derivavano dai comportamenti dei ministri i quali oltre a relegare le donne in posizioni inferiori rispetto a quelle degli uomini sembravano voler far coincidere gli interessi del gruppo con i propri. Questa situazione non coincideva con l'idea che Baker aveva dei processi democratici.

Baker basò tutto il suo attivismo sul principio della democrazia partecipativa che ruota attorno a tre punti chiave: 1) la partecipazione della società è essenziale nei processi decisionali; 2) mira alla riduzione del potere delle gerarchie e 3) attua forme di intervento diretto nei luoghi in cui riscontra leggi ingiuste.

Partendo da questo principio era chiaro che né la NACCP né la SCLC avessero la minima intenzione di abbracciare questo tipo di processo democratico, in quanto concentravano le loro attività in inutili azioni burocratiche che non facevano altro che aumentare la popolarità di un solo leader, non curandosi di aumentare la base democratica del gruppo.

Il primo febbraio 1960 quattro studenti universitari afro-americani organizzarono un sit-in in un ristorante di Greensboro, Nord Carolina chiedendo al titolare, che si rifiutò, di essere serviti nella parte di ristorante riservata ai bianchi. Dopo quattro giorni il titolare cedette, decretando la vittoria dei giovani. Sull'onda di Greensboro, nel giro di poco tempo, si svilupparono all'incirca un centinaio di proteste indipendenti. Ella, pur essendo ancora arruolata nella SCLC provava un grande senso di felicità in quanto per la prima volta i cittadini, e in questo caso dei giovani studenti, si erano attivati per difendere i propri diritti senza l'aiuto o

comunque senza alcuna autorizzazione da parte di una delle principali organizzazioni.

Nell'Aprile del 1960, convinta che gli studenti dovessero essere istruiti alle tattiche del Movimento ma che soprattutto necessitassero di coordinare le loro azioni, organizzò un'assemblea alla quale fu ben contenta di invitare anche King in quanto la sua presenza avrebbe fatto capire ai ragazzi la loro importanza. Il convegno si tenne a porte chiuse poiché Baker non voleva che i ragazzi venissero in qualche modo influenzati dalla presenza dei media.

Mentre i ragazzi interloquivano tra loro, Ella cominciò la sua battaglia contro la SCLC che voleva assorbire il movimento studentesco.

Alla fine dell'incontro fu creato lo SNCC e per aiutare i giovani, Ella Baker lasciò definitivamente la SCLC. Lo SNCC fu la prima organizzazione per la protezione dei diritti civili ad avere una struttura fluida, quindi: i leader cambiavano, tra i due sessi intercorrevano rapporti di eguaglianza, ma soprattutto era completamente estranea a qualsiasi ambiente vicino alla chiesa battista.

Sotto l'egida di Ella Baker, lo SNCC ottenne numerose e importanti vittorie come nel caso dei *Freedom Riders* ovvero di gruppi interraziali che preparavano delle incursioni in tutti gli stati che applicavano la segregazione, o della *Freedom Summer* del 1964 in cui lo SNCC attaccò il mostro segregazionista, il Mississippi per aiutare le popolazioni locali a combattere le ingiustizie sociali cui erano sottoposti.

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