FANNIE LOU HAMER, DOROTHY HEIGHT, AND VIOLA LIUZZO: NOT JUST A DREAM, INITIATORS FOR EQUALITY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the standpoint theory and lived experiences method, introduced by Patricia Hill Collins and Sandra Harding, to examine the lives of three women who were active in fighting for equality. My research indicates their motives for publicly fighting racism stem from their childhoods, a strong sense of social justice, and the desire to create a safer world.

The first chapter discusses the Civil Rights Movement. I discuss gender roles, race, and class. The discussion of using structural violence, systematic oppression, accusations of mental instability, and disabilities are also introduced; showing how they all intersect during movements. The chapter presents the concept as whiteness as property, a concept researched and introduced by Cheryl I. Harris.

The second chapter acknowledges the work of Dorothy Height. Height used her education, class standing to fight for equality. Facing sexism and racism, Height instigated many of the most well-known marches and platforms for equality among races; sharing the stage with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The third chapter recognizes Viola Liuzzo from Detroit, Michigan. Liuzzo came south to challenge the violence and mistreatment accompanying the struggle for civil rights. Liuzzo would become noted as the only white woman to lose her life in the Civil Rights Movement. The discussion surrounding Liuzzo will include how bodies are racialized and discredited when white women joined the ranks with Black freedom fighters.
The fourth chapter discusses the role Fannie Lou Hamer had in empowering Black and poor white people. Hamer had a vision of a more democratic society. Facing intersecting oppressions, Hamer used her experiences and rhetorical talent to break societal barriers. Becoming a victim of structural violence herself, she told her story in order to protect others.

The fifth chapter conceptualizes why I chose to bring these three women together for discussion. A major aspect discussed in this chapter is how these women crossed class, geographical, and race lines to work toward a common goal. This research suggests all three women were aware of the dangers they faced when crossing these boundaries, but did it anyway for a need much greater than their own.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The current study explores the lives of Dorothy Height, Viola Liuzzo, and Fannie Lou Hamer. I explore not only the work that they performed within the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, but also investigate their motivations for becoming activists in the struggle. I inquire into what challenges they faced as women working beyond the boundaries of their homes. I explore what obstacles were limited to each activist, based on their gender, race, class, and ability. This research portrays these three women as catalysts for social justice; furthermore, I discuss these women as individuals. While the work they performed is phenomenal, their personal motivations, backgrounds, and sacrifices within the families are remarkable. Their search for democracy was solid and much more than personal. Each of these activists had a political vision that far reached beyond them. They were embodying the struggle on behalf of all their brothers and sisters; regardless of gender, race, class, or ability.

A significant amount of attention has been placed on women’s roles in the Civil Rights Movement in recent years. Women have been credited with some of the most pivotal moments in the movement, however, the background and specific obstacles of these women are sometimes left out of the conversation. For instance, a common misconception about Rosa Parks is that she was simply tired and decided then and there that she would not get up from her seat. Often people overlook the hours of planning, sacrifice, threats, and the toll this decision to stay seated meant for Rosa Parks and her family. When discussing the Civil Rights Movement, we often think of voting rights, but we must realize the participants were seeking much more. They sought
freedom, respect, dignity, as well as, economic and social equality. They pursued basic needs to survive, which included freedom from oppression, and the ability to keep their families fed, housed, and safe.

While research has been conducted and books have been written about Fannie Lou Hamer, little emphasis has been placed on her political agenda. Narrations take us through her struggles, her speeches, her defiance, and her decision to join the Civil Rights Movement in order to secure voting rights for Black people. Hamer is recognized for her moving rhetorical style and transparency that led society and lawmakers to take notice of how unjust and violent the conditions actually were for Black people, most especially Black people living in the rural areas of the South.

Perceived as an “unlettered and unpolished,” Black woman, Hamer used this perception to her advantage. She learned to use this misconception as a catalyst for change. Hamer was extremely involved in the struggle for voting rights, but she also had a vision for democracy. Fannie Lou Hamer recognized that the issue of class was a crucial element of oppression and worked tirelessly to help alleviate the oppression of all people, not just based on race and/or gender. In my research I draw from different concepts and theoretical approaches including standpoint theory, intersectionality, The Cult of True Womanhood, disability studies, structural violence and systematic oppression.

Dorothy Height has been recognized as the Godmother of the Civil Rights Movement. Height has been acknowledged for her work centered on the Movement, her dedication to social change, and the fact that she was friends with Mary McLeod Bethune. It has also become a well-known fact that Height shared the stage with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during his “I Have A
Dream” speech. Known for her polished appearance and her ability to hold her poise throughout her years as an activist, Height shared the table with many, if not most, prominent citizens and politicians during her years performing activist work. She led the National Council for Negro Women for over forty years and travelled internationally seeking guidance and creating change at every stop. We know a significant amount of information about Height during the Movement, but little about the fact that she began her journey to enact change decades before the beginning of the Movement. Following the advice given to her by her mother at a tender age, Dorothy Height deserves credit for much more than organizing marches and sitting in the shadows while Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his pivotal speech in 1963. In my discussion of Height I use standpoint theory, systematic oppression, intersectionality, Cult of True Womanhood and the politics of respectability; touching briefly on habits of defiance.

Viola Liuzzo has been recorded as the only white woman to lose her life in the Civil Rights struggle. Considered the most controversial of the civil rights martyrs, Liuzzo is most remembered for the facts surrounding her death. Killed by the Ku Klux Klan on the final night of the Selma Voting Rights March in 1965, Liuzzo literally gave her life for the struggle. Books have been written about the FBI informant, Gary Thomas Rowe who was in the car with the murderers, however, there is an insignificant amount that can be found on Liuzzo herself. The FBI files have been released on the details of her death and the trials which resulted from her murder, though her courage and dedication to equality is usually not the focus of the conversation. She was drawn to the movement not due to her own oppression, but because she simply felt she had to do something. Liuzzo was killed in 1965 and it took until 1989 before she was recognized among the martyrs of the movement. Ignoring the social constructions of how a wife and mother should perform in society and the home, Liuzzo gave the ultimate sacrifice for
social justice, while the men that killed her walked freely among society. For my research on Liuzzo, I engaged concepts of whiteness as property, standpoint theory, systematic oppression, structural violence, Cult of True Womanhood and habits of defiance.

What I add to the prior work that has been recorded about women, particularly Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, and Viola Liuzzo, is a feminist standpoint to the work that they pursued and accomplished. I give a different voice and perspective to their work, struggles, motivations, and private lives. Most of the research previously documented about Hamer, Height and Liuzzo, focuses on their roles within society, with little regard to their private or familial lives. I fill in the gaps between their public personas and their private lives, while promoting them as the activists that they truly were. I explore the roles which they performed as white women, Black women, privileged, poor, mothers, wives, daughters and activists.

This research dissects the styles of activism that were employed by Hamer, Height, and Liuzzo. I demonstrate the performance scripts they adhered to in order to further their cause and their political motivations. I investigate and dichotomize the political visions each woman maintained. Often the research performed in regards to these women focuses more on the outcomes, but does not place emphasis on their visions of political change. For my research, I highlight how each activist had a different perception of coalition building across race and gender. I display how they manipulated and deployed strategic negotiation skills to achieve results.

The issue of a gendered and “racialized” body is also a topic for scrutiny I challenge. I explore how these were women “put in their place” by gendering or disabling the body. I look at issues which surrounded these women’s bodies, especially how structural violence and mental
capacities, can be placed on women due to their involvement in activism. Emphasis is placed on actualization versus perception of the women involved. Furthermore, I present how whiteness is often called into question when white women join forces with Black people. I investigate how white women might be deemed a danger to themselves for participation, while Black women were deemed as dangers to society.

Other questions explored are how the private lives of these activists deterred, challenged, or helped advance the work they performed. I feel one aspect lacking is the feminist perspective of these women. For instance, how did Height’s single status improve or negate her ability to pursue social justice? And while, it is common knowledge that Anthony Liuzzo asked his wife not to go to Alabama, what was their relationship like which inspired her to go anyway? We also know from quotes made by Fannie Lou Hamer that she had no desire to be “liberated from her husband,” however, what role did he play at home that allowed her to pursue her work?

My research proves how these three activists blurred, maneuvered, and sometimes shattered the gender stereotypes that they faced during the Civil Rights Movement. I extend beyond the work that they actually performed and focus on the women as individuals, mothers and wives. I examine their motivations, challenges they faced, roles they employed or ignored, and finally the outcomes they hoped to achieve. I place emphasis on the fact that gender, race, and class are critical when researching activism. The intersection of these three aspects can greatly impact how you are allowed to negotiate spaces. What were their strategic negotiations? Also, what government forms of intervention were used to help or hinder the work of these three women? What opinions did famous male Civil Rights leaders maintain of these women? What did the women envision as a way toward equality when faced with the fact that systematic forms of redress often do not work in the search for freedom from oppression?
In conclusion, I draw a common thread which ties these three women together. However, I focus on what makes each person’s commitment and struggles unique. Why did they perform this work? Who did they model their forms of activism after? What legacies did they leave that has been picked up and built upon? What can we do as people dedicated to the cause of social justice so that these three women’s life work was not in vain? Finally, how can we ensure they are given applause for their commitment to education, alleviating struggles of poor people, and giving everyone a fair chance for the ultimate “pursuit of happiness,” promised by the founders of our nation?

For this project, I conducted a textual analysis of ideas of race, gender, class, disability, systematic oppression and structural violence that affected Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height and Viola Liuzzo. I analyze their rhetorical styles, styles of activism, political visions, how they perform coalition building, how disability discourses play out in their lives, habits of defiance and what motivates these women to dedicate their lives to the fight for social justice. I researched memoirs, archives, autobiographies, narratives, and biographical texts to present a different standpoint on their lives; one written from a feminist perspective.

Theoretical approaches I engaged for this research include Patricia Hill Collin’s standpoint theory and Sandra Harding’s standpoint theory, with an emphasis of positions of resistance creating change. I connect scholarship and lived experiences as possibilities for social justice. I exemplify how Fannie Lou Hamer and Dorothy Height demonstrated themselves as representatives in alternative black feminist epistemology and Black Feminist Thought, by using the standpoint theory and lived experiences as their focal point. By challenging gender roles, stereotypes, organizing protests, and challenging political leaders and structures the women in this study helped to uplift Black communities. Height and Hamer exhibited the qualities of
leaders and offered agency as both, scholars and activists. They negated the belief of scholarship being the only form of activism and showed that lived experiences are also crucial to the understanding of oppression and privilege.

In order to place examination of gender roles and scripts of Height, Liuzzo, and Hamer I drew from Barbara Welter’s *Cult of True Womanhood*, Angela Davis’ book entitled *Women, Race and Class*, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church*, which gives a discussion of women’s respectability and how to behave like a women within mainstream society. For the conversation centered on disability I use Nirmala Erevelles, Andrea Minear, and Rosemarie Garland Thomas all of who display disability as a political and social construct. For the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability I refer to Kimberle Crenshaw’s term *intersectionality* and the results. I engage the term and consequences of structural violence by engaging Johan Galtung’s work and systematic/institutional oppression as described by Winter, D.D., and Leighton, D.C. “Structural Violence.” Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology in the 21st Century.” For issues of whiteness as property I engage Cheryl I. Harris’ work.

I use the standpoint theory and the *Matrix of Domination*, by Patricia Hill Collins. This paradigm provides a space and agency for Black women to add knowledge and become empowered within society, social and political revolutions. Collins shows the parallels between Black women as intellectuals and working-class Black women. By turning intellect as well as experience into activism all Black women are able to have a voice and help to provide social and political change.
Collins claims that it is imperative to place women at the center because they are the ones performing the work; conforming to, or blurring the scripts as a means of social change. A feminist standpoint epistemology which declares women’s experiences are the starting points to construct knowledge. Collins writes in Black Feminist Thought, “When making knowledge claims about women, we must always remember that it is women’s concrete experience that provides the ultimate criterion for credibility of these knowledge claims” (Collins, 209). It is central to realize that all knowledge, whether learned or lived, can provide means of activism. One form of activism or knowledge should not be placed superior to the other.

Sandra Harding gives researchers a point of reference regarding the standpoint theory, claiming that people more closely related to the struggles are more objective and more capable of defining oppressions that exist. Four elements of the standpoint theory are described as follows by Harding:

First, its concern is not to articulate women’s or some other marginalized group’s perspective about the group’s lives, though this frequently is an important step in its process. It ambitiously intends to map the practices of power, the ways the dominant institutions and their conceptual frameworks create and maintain oppressive social relations. Secondly, it does this by locating, in a material and political disadvantage or form of oppression, a distinctive insight about how a hierarchical social structure works. Thus Patricia Hill Collins (1991) points out how sociology’s labeling of Black women’s lives as “deviant” permits blaming Black women rather than a racist and sexist social structures. Third, it takes more than recording what women or members of some other oppressed group in fact say or believe to identify these distinctive standpoint insights. Finally, standpoint theory is more about the creation of group’s consciousness’s than about shifts in the consciousness’s of individuals. (Harding, pg. 7)

Harding indicates that a person’s position in society can lead to a greater understanding and therefore transforming political and social awareness of oppressions, evolving identities,
providing a feminist perspective or narrative, and describing diverse journeys toward political transformation.

The importance of using standpoint theory in Black feminism is debated among scholars. Patricia Hill Collins points out that, “It is important to realize that while Black women face similar oppressions due to their gender and skin color but their experiences can vary” (Collins, 28-9). It is imperative that we look at the different ways that people’s lived experiences may fluctuate but that patriarchy and white supremacy are existent for all Black women. Black women from more affluent backgrounds still have to face racism and sexism daily, such is the case for Dorothy Height. When you add classism, the oppressions continue to intersect creating other forms of oppression, such as being deemed as uneducated, poor, and unsuitable to discuss racism and sexism, in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer. By developing their own point of view in regards to their living conditions, many Black women are able to place things in perspective, and develop a plan of action against systematic oppression. By including different standpoints it becomes possible for every Black woman to have agency and develop a consciousness that can empower them to challenge the oppressions they face, openly and publicly.

The examination of Viola Liuzzo focuses on the theory of defiance and Sandra Harding’s standpoint theory and positions of resistance leading to social transformations. Even though at the time of Liuzzo’s death she was considered middle-class, she was still deeply connected to people facing race, class, and gender issues as a result of her childhood. I focus on resistance as a political act, often resulting in political and social results. I establish a basis of Liuzzo’s journey to the South to fight for equality, even though; she was defyng the societal norms that were in place for white women during this time. Liuzzo’s body became racialized due to her involvement in the Civil Rights struggle; based on the theory of the maintenance of a “color line;” which once
crossed can deem a person a traitor of their race. I engage Cheryl I. Harris to set up a paradigm of ‘whiteness as property”’. The Cult of True Womanhood is employed in the discussion of Liuzzo, because of how she was seen as a bad wife and mother because of her association with Black people and the Movement.

During the Civil Rights Movement women were still held to the belief of *The Cult of True Womanhood*, introduced by Barbara Welter in 1820. Roles of women included piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. A” true woman” should accept her place was in the home. Her family and home were her first priority and she was expected to raise patriot children; boys who would follow in their father’s footsteps and girls who would follow the tradition of being good wives. Women were merely an extension of their husbands and families; never to think independently and always honor her husband’s wishes even if she disagreed. To have an opinion was acceptable as long as it mirrored your husbands or if it was kept silent.

According to *The Cult of True Womanhood*, “piety was the core of woman’s virtue and her source of strength” (Welter, 1820). Women were expected to pray rather than question things. If you wanted to read then it was best to read the Bible or books that told you how to be a better homemaker. Purity was a virtue and you could not expect to be accepted in society without this value. Sex was only to be shared with your husband and only when he desired. It was said that “purity is the highest beauty” (Welter, 1820). Submission was crucial to be considered a true woman. This is especially vital in my research because of how men were expected to be the actors and women were expected to be absorbers and supporters. Women were not expected to dishonor their husbands by speaking up for themselves or committing acts that went against their husband’s wishes. Women were expected to be silent and work to honor their families.
Domesticity was the last pillar of the Cult of True Womanhood. Once again we are reminded that the woman’s place was in the home. Women’s morality depended on her ability to do repetitive tasks. “Housework was considered morally uplifting and virtuous; performing needlework was elegant” (Welter, 1820). Education was deemed acceptable if it was to achieve a greater ability to be a proper mother and wife. Some education could in fact make her a better wife and mother under this philosophy because of her role in raising patriots. For my research, I can take this a step further by pointing out that mothers raised their daughters to accept the status quo and raised boys to maintain patriarchal hierarchies. Being single was only reserved for women that were deemed “so extraordinary that she did not need the security or status of being a wife” (Welter, 1820). Women such as this should work toward the good of the community, but never to question the status quo. Any woman who challenged these positions was seen as depraved and damaging society. There were very clear distinct differences in the gender roles placed on Black women and white women, however, one thing remained consistent across the color line; women were not expected to challenge male roles in mainstream society.

Black women’s roles as mothers and providers largely are viewed as different from white women. It was not considered unusual for Black women to work outside of the home; their economic situations are different than most white women, as well as, the fact that they were not viewed as delicate creatures. They raised children often as single mothers due to husbands leaving from the strains of supporting families in an unjust world or even to seek employment in areas away from their families. Black women most often worked in white homes as domestic servants to help white women enrich their families and to give white women free time to pursue civic activities. However, it is essential to acknowledge; Black women were still expected to maintain the virtues piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity within society. They were
expected to raise their children, uplift their communities, and to ensure that the white families they worked for received proper care.

Angela Davis gives a clear distinction between the work performed by white women and Black women in her book, *Women, Race and Class*. Black women often carried a double burden of their own housework, expectations from their communities, and working outside of the home. Black women’s struggles were different because their survival depended on this fortitude. This argument sets up a clear distinction of race, class, and gender role expectations. Davis writes:

> The unorthodox feminine qualities of assertiveness and self-reliance – for which Black women have been frequently praised but more often rebuked – are reflections of their labour and their struggles outside the home. But like their white sisters called “housewives,” they have cooked and cleaned and have nurtured and reared untold numbers of children. But unlike the white housewives, who learned to lean on their husbands for economic security, Black wives and mothers, usually workers as well, have rarely been offered the time and energy to become experts at domesticity. (Davis, 1980)

While roles were different within white and Black homes, society still believed that women should be seen and not heard. It was conventional for Black women to work outside of the home, usually because they were doing work that nobody else wanted to perform. Marriage was normal and kids were usually on the agenda for white women in particular. Black women were not always presumed to have children because of the issues of class and socioeconomic issues. An indication of this is the abundance of forced sterilizations performed among Black and poor women. If a woman was independent it often reflected badly on her husband, making him appear weak.

Society deemed it was tolerable for women to obtain an education, however it was not usually to be used outside of the home. The exceptions were in the cases of women being nurses, teachers, and secretaries. Men considered what was acceptable for women to choose as hobbies
and how their wives spent their free time after household responsibilities were completed. Allowances were distributed to wives so that they could take care of themselves and household needs. It is this aspect that kept many women from joining social activism during times of political or social unrest.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, and Viola Liuzzo clearly did not adhere to the gender roles established by society during their time. Instead they worked to decenter lines society had established. Hamer’s home was filled with children and a husband; the work was done by whoever was there. Height worked as a school teacher, with government agencies, and later became President of the National Council of Negro Women. Liuzzo was a wife and a mother to five children; she also attended school and chose to perform activist work; even when her husband and children were fearful. As a result of their defiance, they endured many hardships. Their adversities included harassment, violence, alienation from their families, ostracism from society, jail time, job loss; sacrificing themselves in order to uplift others.

Disability can be read as a social construct. The fear of the disabled body or mental instability can be used a paradigm to declare people as deviant, especially when the disabled are people of color, or otherwise a citizens deemed as a threat to society’s status quo. People whom possess disabilities, whether physical or mental, are feared because of the threat of the “disease” as being hereditary. Much like the forced sterilization of Black women and poor women in the past, disability issues raised concerns of eugenics and controlling “deviant citizens”. Therefore, disability is another intersect of oppression; much like gender, race, and class, disability is something that must be controlled.

In “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality,” by Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, they say the following, “Colonial
ideologies conceiving of the colonized races are intrinsically degenerate sought to bring these “bodies” under control via segregation and/or destruction. Such control was necessary for the public good” (Offenses, 133). It is also important to note that disability can intersect with class due to the struggles of raising a child with a disability when you are facing poverty. In the case of Fannie Lou Hamer, she adopted one of her daughters from a family who could no longer afford to raise their daughter. The child had been burned badly from a domestic accident. Also, when the dominant society declared a family member as a threat to the community, resources could deter people from keeping their families intact.

Another aspect of disability is when it is a result of systematic oppression and/or structural violence. Erevelles and Minear discuss this in their essay as well, using Patricia Williams as a basis to discuss spirit murder; which can be a consequence of structural violence. The essay quotes Williams as follows:

One of the reasons I fear what I call spirit murder, or disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard, is that its product is a system of formalized distortions of thought. It produces social structures centered around fear and hate, it provides a timorous outlet for feelings elsewhere unexpressed . . . We need to see it as a cultural cancer; we need to open our eyes to the spiritual genocide it is wreaking on blacks, whites, and the abandoned and abused of all races and ages. We need to eradicate its numbing pathology before it wipes out what precious little humanity we have left. (Erevelles, 143)

The concept of spirit murder can be applied to Fannie Lou Hamer and Viola Liuzzo. Hamer suffered physically from the effects of structural violence by forced sterilization, brutality in Winona, Mississippi, and later mentally from the stress of her work. She also became distraught over how the people she worked so intensely to help and protect, deserted her and her family when her body gave out. Viola Liuzzo was killed by white supremacists, an entity of systematic oppression, and then her family was left to battle the character debasement that would
result from her activism. The media and government deemed her not only as a deviant mother and wife, but also as mentally unstable due to her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

Rosemarie Garland Thomas also gives us research that situates disability as a social construct. She initiates to move the conversation revolving around disability as a political issue instead of a medical concern. The body becomes a concern of what society considers the body should be and who should be protected from the deviant citizens, sometimes reasoning that activists need protecting from themselves. Thomas also discusses the “normate,” which describes anyone that is able to step into power; the young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual. This also sets up the discourse of otherness, which connects Hamer and Liuzzo to the study of disability (Thomas, pg. 8).

For my research, I explore how race, class, gender, and disability intersect to form overlapping oppressions. This intersection is known as intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, in 1991. Crenshaw explains the paradigm of intersectionality as “race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to constitute mutually constructing systems of oppression. Intersectional paradigms make two important contributions to understanding the connections between knowledge and empowerment” (Collins, 245). Intersectionality can provide a framework to show how race, class, gender, and disability are prevalent in the lives of activist women during the Civil Rights Movement.

While intersectionality predominantly relates to women of color, I use this term to include Viola Liuzzo, due to the fact that her body was racialized as a result of her involvement in the Movement and her close proximity to Black people during her time in Selma, Alabama. Kimberle Crenshaw describes structural intersectionality as follows:
Structural intersectionality is when individuals are situated at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, so that the reality of multiple identities (race, gender, ethnicity, class etc.) results in complex and compounded effects. These multiple systems of oppression (such as racism, sexism, homophobia etc.) interact with one another and affect the particular experience of an individual. (Crenshaw, 1993: 114)

Structural violence is an important factor when discussing social movements and social activists. It is often structural violence connecting with systematic oppression that prompt people to become involved. Dorothy Height and Fannie Lou Hamer witnessed structural violence every day, while it was when structural violence led to direct violence that finally inspired Viola Liuzzo to travel to Selma to join the freedom fighters. Direct violence is obvious, while sometimes still overlooked; however, structural violence is often invisible to a majority of the population.

The term structural violence was framed by Johan Galtung in 1969. Galtung coined the term to refer to any constraint on human potential due to economic and political structures. Unequal access to resources, to political power, education, health care, or legal standing is forms of structural violence, according to Galtung (Winter and Leighton, 1999). While the term had not been officially devised during the Civil Rights Movement it definitely existed.

Structural violence was not always visible to those that were not oppressed because they simply saw the inequities as ordinary. It was rooted in society and the activists that fought against it were most often deemed as the violent offenders. By reversing the blame, it becomes easy to reduce empathy from citizens who might otherwise be opposed to the direct violence that often stemmed from the disadvantaged public fighting against structural violence. It is important to understand structural violence based on gender for my research, because Height, Liuzzo, and Hamer were also struggling for women’s rights along with race and class; therefore, not only
placing them in the struggle against white supremacy, but also against patriarchal values.

Violence can be committed against the soul as well as against the body according to Galtung, it can also be something that is implied about your character; untruthfulness portrayed that it almost impossible to dispel” (Galtung, 1969).

Institutions are defined as social and political organizations established to implement a service to society for collective good. Examples of institutions in the United States include the legal system, the criminal system, health care system, education, government, and social services. It is the responsibility of the governments, local, state, and federal, to ensure that all people are included in the collective good process. However, it is the Eurocentric lens that allows this process to fail at times. It becomes a question of which groups are entitled to which services and who deserves protection under each entity.

The history of the United States is replete with issues that have arisen due to systems of power and the belief of one group’s superiority over other groups. The hierarchy that exists in the United States allows the dominant group; white, male, Christian, and heterosexual, individuals to rule society. With this system firmly rooted in our society, anyone outside of this system has probability of being oppressed, or limited in their social, political, or educational advancement. Oppression, especially systematic and institutional oppression, suppresses certain groups from reaching their full potential within a white patriarchal society.

Institutional Oppression, Tools for Diversity, describe systematic and institutional oppression as follows:

Institutional Oppression occurs when established laws, customs, and practices systematically reflect and produce inequities based on one’s membership in targeted social identity groups. If oppressive consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is oppressive whether or not the
individuals maintaining those practices have oppressive intentions. Institutional Oppression creates a system of invisible barriers limiting people based on their membership in unfavored social identity groups. The barriers are only invisible to those “seemingly” unaffected by it. The practice of institutionalized oppression is based on the belief in inherent superiority or inferiority. Institutionalized oppression is a matter of result regardless of intent. (Tools for Diversity, 2006)

For my research purposes, I use the term systematic oppression to describe how Dorothy Height, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Viola Liuzzo were victims due to gender, race, and class. All three women were targeted due to their gender, while Height and Hamer, were also targeted due to their race. Class oppressions were apparent throughout each individual’s lives as well. Height had the privilege of class, while Hamer and Liuzzo, were raised in poverty. Liuzzo progressed into middle-class but stayed aware of the issues that centered on class and socioeconomic status due to her upbringing. Oppression is not limited to any particular group and can be fluid due to your own political and social beliefs, and how you choose to act upon those beliefs. Becoming activists in social and political movements that negate the status quo’s beliefs can place you into the oppressed groups regardless of your race, class, or gender.

Race traitors or race mixers usually perform as an act of social justice or activism. By not buying into the property of whiteness they become the “other;” not becoming Black, as some white supremacists would lead you to believe, but usually no longer afforded the privileges of having white skin. For some it is a struggle to either ignore their pull toward activism for equality or to remain silent and suffer internally, accepting the status quo permeated in dominant society. People who chose to join the Black Freedom Fighters during the Civil Rights Movement often faced being ostracized, harassed, threatened, and often banished form their families and spouses. Some, such as in the case of Mrs. Liuzzo, would be lose their life, leaving a family to suffer from media and government accusations of interracial affairs, mental instability, drug use, and being morally depraved. Her character was placed on trial and her family lost.
White supremacy and systems of oppression depend on the notion of being able to distinguish between the empowered and the disempowered population (Smith, 39). They also depend on knowing where each person stands on the issue. Therefore, mixers and passers were a particular threat. It was also threatening when women began to ignore *The Cult of True Womanhood* and join the struggle for equality.

Expectations about male privilege, class privilege, and whiteness as property saturate our society. By placing focus on women such as Dorothy Height, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Viola Liuzzo we reveal how activists, scholars, and ordinary citizens create change. Often it is the lived experiences of oppression which incite emancipatory ideas and revolutionary actors. A nation that claims democracy and freedom cannot fully achieve either until we critically study the past and include all members that contributed to our history; including ways oppressions intersect.

White supremacy, structural violence, and systematic oppression has not been occasional, unusual, or a bizarre occurrence by a few radicals, as Americans have been led to believe by educators, history books, scholars, media, and political leaders. Instead, it has been a constant within the construction of individual and collective identities. The words racism and white supremacy are now masked by words such as tradition and heritage. By studying forms of resistance we create tools needed to create a society focused on equality.

Everyone committed to change must sacrifice something for the collective good. Some sacrifice comforts afforded to them by their class, some sacrifice being home with their families, some sacrifice starting a family of their own, and some sacrifice the privileges awarded to them by being born white. But they all do it for the future generations to live a better life. Displaying empathy and telling their stories they become a crucial element for social justice.
For the purposes of my research, I use the work of Cheryl I. Harris, and her research on whiteness as property, passing, race traitors, and white supremacy. Harris gives an in-depth review of how laws, social and written, evolved to make white skin a privilege and a property protected under law. Harris also gives a story of how her grandmother “passed” as a white woman in Chicago in order to survive. When Harris’ grandmother moved north to escape economic hardship she found that she was only able to obtain viable employment if she chose self-annihilation, each day pretending to be associated with one group and then returning home at night and returning to herself. Her decision was not based on the desire to be white, but based on survival and being able to provide for her two daughters. Harris describes this act by her grandmother, “She was transgressing boundaries, crossing borders, spinning on margins, travelling between dualities of Manichean space, rigidly bifurcated in light/dark, good/bad, white/Black. She was not only passing, but she was trespassing in the white world” (Harris, 1711).

Adhering to whiteness as a form of property is way to exclude members of society from racial domination, economic, social, educational, or political gain. Being white gives individuals protection and privilege over all other groups in society. By using the term “property” you can relate how it was firmly rooted within society to see property as a possession, a status marker. According to Cheryl I. Harris, “Property rights were qualified by race. This fact infused whiteness with significance and value because it was solely through being white that property could be acquired and secured under law. Only whites possessed whiteness, a highly valued and exclusive form of property” (Harris, 1724). To be white, meant you were considered a person, with all rights that came with being a citizen of the dominant society; to be anything other than white excluded you from this privilege.
This concept is critical in my research, on Dorothy Height and Fannie Lou Hamer, but also includes Viola Liuzzo. Because of her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, she was deemed no longer to possess whiteness or white status. Liuzzo lost her reputation as a white woman, and became a racialized or tainted body. According to Harris, “The direct manifestation of the law’s legitimation of whiteness as a reputation is revealed in the well-established doctrine that to call a white person Black is to defame her” (Harris, 1735). When the men who murdered Viola Liuzzo were put on trial, the trial quickly resulted in the defamation of Liuzzo’s character instead. Mary Stanton, author of From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo, writes, “Reflecting on the death of Viola Liuzzo, the embarrassment that the FBI would suffer from the presence of its undercover informer in the murderer’s car, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, marshaled the Bureau’s resources to blacken the dead woman’s reputation” (Stanton, 55).

This paper attempts to display the methods used by three women in the fight for equality. This paper contributes to the history of Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, and Viola Liuzzo, not simply by telling their biographies, but by examining their lives and work from a feminist perspective. By surveying the experiences of these three women, the reader will be able to understand how neglecting gender roles and coalition building across race lines can combat racism and sexism. The narratives I give of each woman answers questions about what motivated them and what they hoped to achieve for social justice. Their work empowered them, their communities, and society as a whole. This paper is an instrument proving what one person can accomplish, as well as, how allies working together can create change.
Chapter Two: Dorothy Height, A Lady of the Civil Rights Movement and Equality

Dorothy Irene Height was born the daughter of a building contractor and nurse, in Virginia. She soon moved to Pennsylvania. After winning a scholarship to college, she was accepted by Barnard College in New York City, but failed to attend because their quota of Black people had been met. However, she did attend college at New York University, gaining a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree. Following college she was employed by the city of New York as a welfare caseworker. She later met Mary McLeod Bethune and began working with the National Council of Negro Women. Height worked for rights among Black women and helped promote solidification among Black families and communities. Inspiration for strengthening the community came from her mother who had instilled in her independence and urged her to define herself and not allow anyone else to do this for her.

When Height began working directly with the Civil Rights Movement, she was the inspiration for many marches and demonstrations; however, her work largely goes unnoticed. Height shared the platform with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during his “I Have a Dream,” speech in 1964, but was not allowed to speak because she was a woman. The deliberate exclusion of a woman’s voice from the podium did not stop her persistence in the struggle. She exuded a quiet power, letting men take the spotlight and credit, while she prompted a revolution. One of the quotes she is famous for is, “If you worry about who is getting credit, you don’t get much work done” (Miller, 107). She often said the movement was a symbol of uniformity, not unity. By
embodying the role of the “Black Lady,” she portrayed herself as a picture of grace under fire, all the while challenging male patriarchy and injustices within Black communities.

John Lewis, a Congressman from Georgia, was 23 years old during the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in 1964. When recalling Height, Lewis declared the following, “Height was a spokesperson for women’s rights long before the modern movement. She created a space on the civil rights platter for women and issues related to women, maintaining the appearance of a lady from the era of refinement” (Cose, web). By performing a script of conformity, or appearing to observe societal expectations, Height was allowed to not only open the doors for women, but often times knock them down completely for seven decades. Height brought together Southern and Northern white and Black women in Mississippi, organized voter drives, organized day care centers, school breakfast programs, that she is now credited for, but was largely overlooked even up until her death. With little attention to her personal life, she emanated herself as an asexual Black lady, never having a family of her own; a depiction that worked well for her in the era.

Dorothy Height is remembered as a quiet, graceful, practically invisible champion of the Civil Rights Movement. Many conclusions can be drawn in relation to Height’s invisibility. The first reason being the fact that she was expected to do the work, but not to receive the credit for her effort. Height was well aware of the hierarchy, but chose to commit herself to the task at hand; allowing the men to take recognition publicly. Height recalled this in detail this in her account of the famous march on Washington in her personal account in *Sisters in the Struggle* by quoting, “The evidence of women’s work can be seen everywhere. It made some of us sit up and think in a new and different way. We were forced to recognize that, traditionally, black women, through unstinting support of race movements we did not question our subordinate roles, we put
the men up front” (Height, 90). While militant in her dedication, Height was not combative against male egos; instead she chose a method of strategic negotiations to achieve results. While everyone within Black communities were aware of the oppression caused by racism, few men were concerned with the oppression caused by sexism. Dorothy Height challenged this assumption, only she chose to do so in subtle ways.

Raised in a home that encouraged not only self-help, Height was also taught at a tender age to help others in need, regardless of race, class, or gender. She was challenged by her mother to help people who she felt needed it, rather than ridicule or demean them. Height became a leader at a young age, often helping fellow students with their work. Her mother instilled a cooperative attitude in her young daughter, rather than one of a competitive nature. For instance, Height recalls in her memoir a young boy who needed help in an Easter program at school. Her mother’s advice to her was, “Well, if you are all that smart, why didn’t you help? If you cannot do that then I think you should resign from the Easter program” (Height, 15). Height’s mother kept her young daughter in check, knowing the world would challenge her much harsher. One of the lasting legacies Height credits her mother with is she taught her to self-define and evaluate herself; always giving her best.

Dorothy Height was polished and taught to always be polite. Height learned that taking a peaceful approach and remaining non-confrontational yielded results for her. Chosen for a job as an administrator for the Home Relief Bureau in New York, she was told she received the promotion because she had” the right temperament and was not easily upset under pressure” (Height, 48). As a Black woman, Height was usually content with playing a passive role to help uplift herself and those around her. She firmly believed everyone had something to give and lived experiences were crucial to understanding social issues. While often times finding herself
in situations where she was tokenized, she would use this time to give examples of the struggles that Blacks, most especially Black women confronted. In her memoir, Height states, “Even if you are a token, you have an important function to fulfill. When I have been the only African American or the only woman in a situation, I have spoken up for greater representation” (Height, 65). This proclamation connects Height to Patricia Hill Collins’ theory of lived experiences providing a new perspective of scholarship and activism. Height’s voice was empowering Black communities, as well, as women in general.

Always committed to reducing injustices based on race, Height’s even temperament and ladylike composure should not be misunderstood for complacency in regards to gender oppression. Height embodied the qualities needed in order to move in the social circles which could be of the greatest benefit to her causes, however, she was concerned with women’s issues. In 1939, Height was working with the YWCA in Harlem when she began to hear stories of the Bronx “slave markets.” Height brought these issues of exploiting women and young girls to the city council. She was appalled at how women of all ages would report to designated street corners in Harlem to be surveyed and taken back to white homes in the Bronx to perform tasks in their homes, most of the time for very little, if any compensation and with no regulations. It was also reported some of the young women were sexually assaulted by men in the homes. When challenged on her language of using the term “slave market,” Height stood her ground and insisted that was exactly what it was and worked tirelessly to get hiring centers opened up for these women, so that workers and employers were registered. She was defeated but her stance on the hiring centers and women’s exploitation opened the door for the next step in Height’s life, working for the National Council of Negro Women.
It was while working with the NCNW that Height met two women who would help her grow as an activist, Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt. Both women were instrumental in creating change among women and African Americans. It was Bethune who would illustrate the importance of working together; with everyone, poor, old, white, black, man, or woman, in order to generate a better society. She demonstrated the significance of solidarity when working toward eliminating injustice. It was also Bethune who would give Height a quote that followed her throughout the rest of her days of activism, “The freedom gates are half ajar. We must pry them fully open” (Height, 83). Height would become one of Roosevelt and Bethune’s biggest assets in fighting for equality; they were determined that women were the key to change.

Even though Height was a champion for change, she found she was still considered a “colored” woman who was given respect among her activist circles, but when she was in a terrible car accident she was faced with disrespect. While in the hospital recovering from the crash, she was continually called “Dorothy.” Only when the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit her did this revelation occur to her; for all the fighting she had done for women, the nurses were instructed to only call Black patients by their first name. Roosevelt insisted they call her Miss Height. It was during her hospital stay that she finally befriended one of her head nurses who taught her a domestic task, one which would give her strength to endure, even as a “ladylike task;” the art of knitting. Forever the Black Lady, after Height left the hospital she wrote over a thousand thank you notes to well-wishers.

One of Height’s qualities was to be able to move a discussion in the way she wanted the dialogue to ensue; she had learned the art of being able to disagree without being disagreeable (Height, 120). Submission and compliance, as introduced by Barbara Welter in the *Cult of True*
Womanhood, was expected of women during this time, and the art of dialogue was another way
Height used strategic negotiation. Height maintained the ability to bridge the gap between
activists when it seemed that they were at odds. While she credits Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for
keeping everyone centered on common goals, Height was usually the one who found a way to
keep a united male-female peer connection. While investigating gender roles it is important to
note that it is usually women who are expected to keep everyone amicable, which was a role
Height played well. She worked in leadership groups as a volunteer, often when men were being
paid for the same work, all in order to see social justice progress.

The March on Washington, August, 1963, proved to be a pivotal moment for Height. As
an instrumental coordinator of the march, Height was not allowed to speak. As several hundred
women conducted the work to make the march a reality, the only female voice heard on the day
of the march was that of Mahalia Jackson, who sang the national anthem. While Black men
recognized the problems of racism, they clearly did not recognize the problems regarding
sexism. Women were still expected to produce the work, but not take the credit. Bayard Rustin,
civil rights activist, insisted it was not necessary to have a woman take the podium because they
were a part of all the groups who would be speaking, such as churches and labor groups. While
resisting racism, men were continuing to accept sexism.

This marginalization played a colossal role in awakening the women’s movement within
Black communities. Height stated in regards to their exclusion, “Mr. Rustin’s stance showed us
that men honestly did not see their position as patriarchal or patronizing. They were happy to
include women in the human family, but there was no question as to who headed the household”
(Height, 146, 2003). Pauli Murray, lawyer and clergy, prepared a paper in response to women
being excluded from the podium, addressing the need to work against sexism, in addition to
racism. Murray wrote:

> The civil rights revolt, like many social upheavals, has released powerful pent-up
> emotions, cross currents, rivalries, and hostilities. In emerging from an essentially
> middle class movement and taking on a mass character, it has become a vehicle to
> power and prestige, and contains many of the elements of in-fighting that have
> characterized labor’s emergence, or the pre-independence African societies. . . .
> What emerges most clearly from events of the past several months is the tendency
to assign women to a secondary, ornamental, or “honoree” role instead of the
partnership role in the civil rights movement which they have earned by their
courage, intelligence, and dedication. It was bitterly humiliating for Negro
Women on August 28, to see themselves accorded little more than token
recognition in the historic March on Washington. Not a single woman was invited
to make one of the major speeches or to be part of the delegation of leaders who
went to the White House. The omission was deliberate. (Thomas and Franklin, 90)

This was a stance that many would not embrace because they saw that most of the
problems were based on race, not gender. The focus on the issue of women’s rights would have
to once again take a back burner, however, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The
problem then became an economic one; spaces were open to the Black communities now
according to law, however, most could not afford them.

The work Height performed within the Civil Rights Movement was far reaching across
class, gender, race, and geographical boundaries. Dorothy Height was elected president of the
NCNW in 1958, a position she held for 40 years. In October 1963, the NCNW was pushed into a
position helping to lead the struggle for freedom in the South. When notified by the secretary of
the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a young member of SNCC of the severe
mistreatment of people involved in the voter registration drive in Dallas County, Alabama,
Height leapt into action. Travelling South, Height would witness the seriousness of institutional
violence and all that it can cause. She witnessed that no matter how bad the violence got, the
young people committed to fighting for their rights and their parent’s right to vote would not
waver. Threatened with sexual assault, starvation, and beating the young people continued their struggle. After her brief visit in Selma, Alabama, however, Height decided she would have to do her work with the voter’s drive from New York. A subpoena was issued for her arrest and she never returned to Selma.

Height did not give up the fight, but instead chose to avoid arrest if possible. She and several church groups organized the Women’s Interorganizational Committee in 1963, including concerned women from the North and the South, working together to find a way to keep the young freedom fighters safer. Once again bridging a gap, Height questioned if the Southern women wanted Northern help or if they would be deemed agitators. Claire Harvey, a representative of NCNW from Jackson, MS, assured them that the women from the North could help quoting, “You can be like a long-handled spoon, reaching down and stirring us up, bringing us together in ways that we could not do by ourselves” (Height, 165). Dorothy Till, a representative, from Charleston, South Carolina, in the Women’s Interorganizational Committee, voiced her opinion of women’s roles in the movement adding, “Women’s power is neither financial nor political. Women are the shock absorbers. That has always been women’s role” (Height, 166).

Soon after the meeting with the women from the North and the South, The Great Mississippi Project, began organization. The Great Mississippi Project was established to set up freedom schools and to run voter registration campaigns in Southern rural communities. This would bring together people from diverse classes, genders, and races. The organization included young, Northern college students and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The project became an illuminating moment for many women, including Height. It became a moment when class would intersect into the movement. Concerned with how the young people struggling
for voter’s rights were being treated, Black and white women of prominence came together to form Wednesdays in Mississippi. Their goal was to establish solidarity among the two races in order to help Black and poor members of Mississippi to gain full citizenship. Their official statement was as follows:

We believe it is important that private citizens of stature and influence make it known that they support the aspirations of the citizens of Mississippi for full citizenship, that they deplore violence, and that they will place themselves in tension-filled situations to try to initiate both understanding and reconciliation. (Height, 169)

They were crossing lines of gender, race, class, and region in order to inspire empathy. This is a perfect example of Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, as well as, the immediate need for ways of fighting systematic oppression. Once again Dorothy Height would travel south to help the disenfranchised, but this time she would be working in Mississippi.

The dangers of women, especially Black and white women, together in Mississippi were soon brought to Height and her colleagues’ attention. She would also see once again the determination that the freedom fighters in the South maintained. While being harassed in a local diner and being called “girls” by the owner and several of the customers, they began to become fearful and decided to leave the restaurant; it was then that they realized that all of the Black staff members had created an honor guard around them so that they could leave unscathed. The men felt a particular calling to “protect their women,” with one young gentleman declaring, “That if any of our women are bothered here tonight, they will never forget it” (Height, 172). The women were fighting against a system, not just a fight over race and class, and all prepared for the worst. Dorothy Height had left her comfort zone of fighting in theory and put that theory to action; in one of the most dangerous places in the United States at this time.
After joining the masses in Mississippi, Height was approached by, Fannie Lou Hamer; after her return to New York and a new alliance was formed. Hamer explained to Height why it was hard for the poor and Blacks to sometimes join the Movement Height felt so strongly towards. The privilege of class, even as a Black woman, sometimes enables people to miss details that others cannot afford to deny. Hamer explained to Height, “You see, Miss Height, down where we are, food is used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around” (Height, 188). Together Hamer and Height, with resources the National Council of Negro Women could produce, the “pig bank” was created. Supplying the most basic need; food, established one of the first steps to freedom from oppression.

With this new way of feeding their families and more freedom from fear of losing their jobs, and not being able to sustain their loved ones, poor women were able to join the movement. They gained greater mobility and a new sense of self-definition. With the classes and races united, the struggle became everyone’s problem; one which could no longer be ignored or negated.

Dorothy Height was a phenomenon in the fight for equality. The fact she never married and never mentioned having relationships with men was one of the ways that she was seen, and will probably forever depicted as a “Black Lady.” She was, after all, the prototype for the “Black Lady.” She was educated, regal, well-dressed, and well-mannered. Rarely speaking out of turn and remaining true to her stance that men were allies even when they were portraying patriarchal qualities. It is not ironic that she was depicted as the “Godmother of the Civil Rights Movement”, never bearing children of her own but always there to take care of those around her.
Lisa B. Thompson further explains the role of the Black Lady in her book, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class*. Thompson’s works, as well as, some instances read in Height’s career make you question if Height was truly the epitome of the “Black Lady” or if she was practicing defiance, or simply hiding her private life as a means of protection and advancement. Thompson explains the performance of Black women as follows:

The performance of middle-class Black womanhood includes a particular set of precepts that determine how Black women may construct or present themselves. This performance relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes. To be kind, gentle, calm, and serene were traits that were critical for women who strove to be examples of perfect Black womanhood. (Thompson, 2-3)

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham adds to this discussion in her book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church* by stating the following:

They were conforming and performing to the ideologies of the Cult of True Womanhood in order to uplift Black communities. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham also calls this the “politics of respectability”, stating, “The politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations. (Higginbotham, 185)

One instance Height discusses in her memoir which leads to a critical discussion of Height’s performance as an asexual Black Lady is of her relationship with a friend named Robert. The relationship Height described displays to the reader that even though she never married or had children of her own, she did possess intimate relationships. She credited Robert as being her support system and making sure she was fed; he chauffeured her and always made sure her bags were packed for trips. He became Height’s chosen family and later was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Height became his caregiver until his death. This information does not change Height’s legacy, but emphasizes her constant determination to help others, even in her intimate relationships. The social and political activism she performed will keep Height as a respected
freedom fighter. She evoked poise, grace, dignity, and honor; indicating she was content to accept whatever credit was bestowed upon her.
Chapter Three: Viola Liuzzo, A Mother Fighting for Justice

Viola Liuzzo has been recorded in history as the only white woman killed in the struggle for Civil Rights. While many rumors have been depicted about her character and the fact she was a white woman who travelled south to march alongside Black freedom fighters, it is important to remember the reasons such rumors and character judgments would be placed on Liuzzo. She was a mother to five children, had a husband, and was middle-class; so the fact she was killed by white supremacists weighed heavily on the minds of people who did not understand the struggle. People fear the unknown and most especially “race traitors.” Furthermore, if a white, middle class, wife, and mother could be killed then there must be something wrong with her; not the system.

Viola Liuzzo was not born into middle-class. Liuzzo was born in Pennsylvania, in 1925, to parents who were working-class and always struggling to survive. Soon after her birth the family relocated to the South. Viola spent most of her young life in Georgia and Tennessee, often receiving government assistance for necessities. Her father lost his hand in a mining accident, making it hard for him to find work. She was also a product of an era where sometimes young girls in the South got married to lessen the stress of the economic situation on the family, often gaining jobs of their own to help the family as well. This was the case with Viola Liuzzo. Her mother encouraged her to get married and create a different life for herself. It is also central to note that for a young woman during this era, being unattached was imposed, not pursued.
Liuzzo married at the age of sixteen but was quickly divorced from her first husband and left the South. Her second marriage was in 1943, in Detroit, Michigan. This marriage produced two children and ended in divorce after six years. Finally, in 1950 she met Anthony Liuzzo who would become her third and final husband. They had three more children and he adopted the two children from her previous marriage. (Stanton, 83-85)

Even though Liuzzo adhered to societal norms of marriage at a young age, the fact that she divorced twice would give a setting for investigations to deem her as erratic and unstable. In fact, the FBI would take this information to set-up a pretense of Liuzzo as an erratic woman. (FBI files, 1990) Little attention was given to her upbringing and the socioeconomic situations of her youth. Instead, they chose to paint a picture of a woman who travelled around looking for stability, when in fact, she was seeking personal freedom and self-definition.

Liuzzo’s marriage to Anthony Liuzzo was nontraditional for the time. Her husband was thirteen years older than her, which would also be focused on during the trials against the men that killed her. All the information from her past placed her under speculation, making it appear that she was on trial, not the murderers. Her husband, Anthony was employed in Detroit by the Teamsters Union as a Business Agent. Liuzzo’s marriage to a man employed by the Teamsters Union also led to speculations of involvement in communism, which was the perceived notion of a government who remained suspicious of unions.

While married to Anthony Liuzzo, Viola performed scripts of a housewife. However, she did seek an education, and was supported in this decision by her husband. She had a strong impression of education, which she did not have the privilege to obtain as a younger adult. Education values would also be a strategy that would be used to discredit her in the trial meant to
prosecute the men who took her life. In 1964, Liuzzo became an advocate to change the legal age of dropping out of school from sixteen to eighteen. She purported that children should remain in school until they were legally considered adults (Stanton, 60).

When the hearing was set for Liuzzo, regarding the fact that she had taken her own children out of a school which only required children to attend until the age of sixteen, the judge moved to drop the charges if she would reinstate her children. Liuzzo refused the motion and instead paid the fine so this rebuttal would remain on her record; to allow the charges to be dropped would indicate that she complied with the schools regulations.

Liuzzo was publicly declared emotionally disturbed. It was clear to the judge that the sense of advocacy that Liuzzo had for her educational beliefs and her disagreement with the law, declared by men, made her a “professional crusader.” The judge reported on her record that, “Liuzzo was disturbed and appeared to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” That would be the only valid excuse for her noncompliance. Liuzzo’s official statement regarding why she took her children out of school and refused the dropped charges were, “I took the girls out of school because I want a real case to present to the State Board of Education. I wanted to have a test of the compulsory education laws and find out why the State loses interest in children at the age of sixteen years” (FBI, 1990).

Viola Liuzzo began night classes at Carnegie Institute, a training school for medical assistants, in 1961. She had a desire to work outside of the home and wanted something more significant than waiting tables, being a secretary, or working in retail. She was older than most of the students there and quickly became involved supporting fellow students in their studies. She became a mentor, helping students study, carpooling, and discussing their lives and current events. The discussions of events happening in regards to civil rights became a turning point for Liuzzo and her classmates. The discussions of current events soon turned into debates on political and social injustices. (Stanton, 139)
Viola Liuzzo graduated with honors from Carnegie and received a job at a medical center. While working at the center, she soon began to witness the discrepancies of the pay scale between men and women. There was also an inconsistency between men who received overtime and women who did not, being that men surely needed the extra pay more to support their families. This was troubling to Viola and she began quarreling with her supervisor over these facts. Once a secretary was laid off without severance, Liuzzo used this as a catalyst to make a change in the system. Due to her husband’s involvement with the Teamsters, she was familiar with labor negotiations. She devised a plan to get reporters involved in the injustices of the company. Liuzzo’s insubordination in regards to the injustices in the medical center led to the depiction of her as emotionally and mentally unstable. Women were not expected to challenge gender inequalities within in the work environment. Her defiance of being submissive, or the *Cult of True Womanhood*, indicated to mainstream society she was unstable.

After her dismissal for noncompliance, Viola was employed at another medical facility as an assistant to a Nigerian medical researcher. Her friendship with the researcher was questioned, however, for no apparent reason. The sheer fact, she had become friends with the Nigerian woman, who had encouraged Liuzzo to pursue her education and activism, was reason enough during this period to question her morals. Liuzzo quit her job at the hospital to pursue her studies; however, after her murder another story was constructed by the FBI.

The reason that was reported by the FBI for Liuzzo’s dismissal from the medical center proclaimed Liuzzo has been found in the laboratory without permission. Upon arrival at the hospital, an unidentified male, reported he had walked into the lab early on a Sunday morning to find Liuzzo there. He described Liuzzo as disheveled and getting out of one of the cots in the laboratory. He said that his appearance was apparently unexpected and that Liuzzo was wearing
a bloody hospital gown and had been lying with a woman that was wearing street clothes (FBI reports, 1990), indicating deviant behavior. No other information was given and the accuser's name was omitted from the records.

When Liuzzo was terminated or resigned, the facts of this are still unclear, from the hospital, she then returned to the academy. She began classes at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan, where she resided with her family. This was an occurrence that would change her life; ultimately ending it. While at Wayne State University, Liuzzo became involved in issues revolving around the Civil Rights Movement. She attended a few peaceful protests on campus, but it was the night that policemen attacked freedom marchers in Selma which changed the course of her life. While witnessing the horror on television news broadcasts following the attack, Liuzzo made the decision to travel south to join the march in Selma.

Liuzzo was already committed to the journey, and was on her way to Alabama before she notified her family; a decision she made to protect her husband and children. Liuzzo knew her husband would try to stop her out of fear, not because he would object to the cause, and her oldest daughter would want to join her. Throughout her children’s lives, she had instilled a great sense of humanity and empathy within each of them, characteristics that each child embraced. In John Blake’s book, *Children of the Movement*, Penny Liuzzo, the eldest daughter remembers her mother by saying, “She was always for the underdog. Once our neighbors had a fire, and she went around and took up a collection to replace the toys – this was around Christmas time – and they had eight kids” (Blake, 198). This was just one example given to display the kind of humanity Liuzzo provided her children.
The choice Viola Liuzzo made was one which would haunt her family in perpetuity, not because they disagreed with her choice to march, but simply because of how her memory would be recorded. While Washburn, a friend that Liuzzo made in Selma, also warned Liuzzo about the work she was doing in Selma, neither told her that she should return home. The warnings that were reported by the FBI were simply words spoken between women, each concerned for the other. Washburn warned Liuzzo, “this is a dangerous place that anywhere police used gas and prods on people is a dangerous place” (FBI files, 1990). Washburn, as well as, the rest of the world had watched as officials committed violence against peaceful protestors seeking equality. Liuzzo however was not deterred from her dedication to the struggle.

The work Liuzzo implemented during her stay in Selma was discredited by the investigation performed by the FBI following her death. Questions arose about her capabilities and dedication as a mother, as well as, her role as a wife. Her motivations for joining the crusade were placed under scrutiny and issues of whiteness were dismantled. Her body was racialized and her mental capacity was placed on trial. Cheryl I. Harris’ theory on whiteness as property is relevant in the ways in which Viola Liuzzo body was placed on trial. To be white gave you privilege and Liuzzo had ignored her privilege in order to protest and rally for Black citizens, therefore, she lost her white status. *The Cult of True Womanhood*, as explained by, Barbara Welter is crucial in this discussion as well. By leaving her home, children, and husband, Liuzzo had given up her respectability as woman.

The motivations for Viola Liuzzo to travel to Selma are based on her childhood and class in part. Growing up Viola had been surrounded by oppressions based on her family’s socioeconomics conditions. By spending a large portion of her formative years in the South, Liuzzo witnessed firsthand how class and race could inhibit the ability to gain personal freedom.
She went to the South for many reasons, but the central reason she went was empathy. She believed she could help if she was there, but knew that the marches and protests that they were conducting on her campus did little to disassemble the inhumane treatment, structural violence and systematic oppression in Selma. Washburn asked her as they were sharing lunch one day at the church, the central meeting place for freedom fighters, why she was there to which she replied, “I had to come because of the brutality in Selma. I don’t see how anybody could keep from coming” (FBI Files, 1990). Mary Stanton, in *From Selma to Sorrow*, quotes from an interview taken with the Liuzzo family after Viola’s death a tribute to her beliefs and her teaching by saying, “What Viola taught her children, was to take their lumps, to live intensely, treat all people as equals, and to keep their promises” (Stanton, 59). Viola Liuzzo joined the fight for civil rights because of her belief in equality and allowing others a chance to reach their full potential.

The work Liuzzo achieved in Selma might not be considered monumental; however, her death would create a case that would shake the nation and the systems in place. Political systems, the FBI, and lawyers scrabbled to discredit Liuzzo, in order to hide the FBI’s connection to the Ku Klux Klan. The Bureau had been warned by an informant that they had placed with the KKK that something bad was going to happen on the night Liuzzo was murdered, however nothing was done to stop the incident. The warning did not give specifics; but no extra protection was placed on call for the marchers travelling the dark roads of Alabama following the march from Selma to Montgomery. The trial surrounding Liuzzo’s death did not focus on her murder. In fact, it was not considered a murder trial at all, but instead they were charged with violating her civil rights. The trial was used to dismantle Liuzzo and her family’s morality.
The motives of the killers were never interrogated. The motives they used were clear and concise. Liuzzo was an outside agitator, a race mixer or race traitor; she was involved in a movement that fought white supremacy; and she was transporting a young Black man in her car. Any one of these details was reason enough for her life to be deemed detestable by the KKK. The court decided instead to ask why she was doing this work in the first place. Why would she place herself in this much risk, simply to help Black citizens of Alabama?

Viola Liuzzo did not perform the acceptable scripts for a white woman. It was stated many times throughout the different trials surrounding her murder, if she had been at home with her husband and kids, where she should have been, this tragedy could have been avoided. Her characteristics of a mother were interrogated, but the fact that she did not leave her children alone never came out in the courtroom. In all of the research written after her death, her children were all quick to defend their mother’s honor; stating that they were proud of her, even though they are the ones that had lost the most. It was not the death of their mother that was the hardest for them, but the way she was portrayed by the public. An indication of Liuzzo’s children’s respect for their mother’s work is portrayed by her son, Tony Liuzzo. In 1982, Tony travelled to Selma to join the reenactment of the march across the Edward Pettus Bridge. After walking for two days he stopped to lay a wreath were his mother had perished seventeen years earlier, he quotes, “As I stopped to lay the wreath at the spot where she was murdered, I thought I could feel her with me. Her spirit was moving me” (Stanton, 217).

Liuzzo’s children reflected on their childhood with fond memories of their mother. Even though she was not what would be considered traditional, they always had fun with their mother. She was a vibrant young woman, always taking them on nature hikes, instilling in them independence, and giving them freedom to define themselves. She loved holidays and they
would decorate and celebrate holidays in a jubilant nature. She was very close to her children, so close that her oldest daughter Penny, who had just graduated from high school at the time of her mother’s death, had a premonition that her mother would not make it back from Selma.

Penny Liuzzo Herrington, the oldest of Viola’s children, describes the night her mother died in a book compiled by John Blake, entitled, *Children of the Movement.* It is important as you read Penny’s account not to discredit the spiritual connection the children had with their mother, after all she had raised them to be in touch with themselves; mind, body, and spirit.

Penny quotes:

> On March 26, 1965, I was watching the Donna Reed show at home in Detroit when a wave of nausea suddenly swept over me. I knew in an instant what had happened. “Oh, my God, My mom’s dead.” The call came at midnight after I had gone to bed. My father answered the phone and screamed, “Penny, your mother’s dead. They killed her.” Then something happened that I cannot explain forty years later. Sally, her six-year-old sister, walked into the bedroom and said, “No, Mama’s not dead. I just saw her walking in the hall.” (Blake, 195)

These indicators of Liuzzo as a dedicated mother are not the facts that were being made public after Liuzzo’s murder. Instead her reputation was attacked. Structural violence and systematic oppression had led to the death of Viola Liuzzo. The focus, however, was placed on discrediting her as a drug addict, mentally unstable, sleeping with Black men, and married to a communist involved in organized crime. It was imperative for officials to racialize Liuzzo, place blame on her perceived disability, hysteria and mental weakness, and defiance of mainstream depictions of how a mother should conduct herself. This was done in order to remove the government’s implication in Liuzzo’s death. After all, the FBI had been warned that something catastrophic might take place on the night of Liuzzo’s murder.

Viola Liuzzo’s family was forced to go through trials and media speculation about a woman who they knew to be an advocate for change. Her philosophy was that one person and
one voice can help create transformation. The autopsy listed that she appeared to be disheveled and dirty; stating that her feet were black and that her clothes were wrinkled. By marring her reputation, officials were able to influence minds; making society at large believe the reason Liuzzo had been in the car with the young Black man that night were anything but respectable. By stating her feet were black, not dirty, indicates that not only was she befriending Black people, but turning into one herself. The rebuttals of these statements are easy. Her clothing was wrinkled and her was hair disheveled because the night before the final miles of the march, she had slept in her car, offering her bed to someone that she felt needed it more than she did. Her feet were dirty because she, like hundreds of others, had walked the last five miles to Montgomery barefoot. And no indication of needle marks or recent sexual activity was represented in the autopsy, as was stated by the defendants.

In 1971, therapist Naomi Weisstein stated that women were summed up in short by the basic stereotype of inferiority stating, “If women know their place, which is in the home, they are really quite lovable, happy, childlike, loving creatures” (Stanton, 108). Reports surrounding Liuzzo’s death adhered to this stereotype, with little regards to her true domestic relationships. Liuzzo was happy to be a wife and loved her husband. They respected each other and their own independence to decide what was best for them. She had a good relationship with her children, and like most middle to upper class white women in the 1960’s; had help in the home rearing them.

Liuzzo did not go off on crusades leaving her family to fend for themselves. Liuzzo’s class status allowed her to perform activism without leaving her family to perform the work that society said she should be doing at home. She chose a life that suited her and her family. She was
committed to social justice and she travelled to Selma to add to the power reached in numbers, to
walk beside other freedom fighters in solidarity.
Chapter Four: Fannie Lou Hamer, A Fearless Woman, A Warrior for Democracy

Fannie Lou Hamer displayed how rhetoric and dedication can provide social change. Her power was her experiences and her voice; refusing to be quiet, she demanded attention to the injustices of Black and poor white people. By giving details of her life and relentlessly attacking leaders in communities and beyond, Hamer shows us how education and scholarship are not always essential for change to transpire.

Fighting for justice and equality was not something Hamer thought should be done quietly. In respect to Patricia Hill Collin’s characterization concerning epistemology within Black Feminist Thought, Hamer’s work was from the standpoint theory of knowledge. Using lived experiences and her ability as a remarkable story teller, Hamer championed for equality. Hamer came from a poor, sharecropping family in Mississippi, learning at the age of 45 voting rights actually applied to her, not just white people. Using her abilities, not her education, Hamer became a source of empowerment among Black people and poor white people. Exemplifying transparency of her own struggles, she led people to demand the right to vote in the South, especially Mississippi, the poorest state in America.

Hamer became a registered voter, a field secretary for SNCC, and was a founding member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention, held in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1964. With little regard for the comfort of those in attendance of her speeches, Hamer discussed the murders of civil rights activists and discussed the death threats and brutality she
herself had faced. Hamer had been beaten so severely, while jailed in Mississippi, for refusing to succumb to a “whites only” restriction, she became permanently disabled. When asked to consent to a two seat compromise at the 1964 Democratic Convention for Black delegates, while 68 seats would be filled by white delegates, Hamer objected. In order for her and other’s to gain access however, they took the two allotted passes, going in and then sending the passes back out for others to join. She began the speech discussed by many scholars, historians, and society at large today. She declared, “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired” (Hamer, 1964). By rejecting that women were to remain silent and let the male leaders speak, Hamer flipped the script of submissiveness. She led the convention through the account of her brutal beating by the hands of Mississippi law enforcement and demanded everyone should be treated as human beings in America, followed by a heartfelt rendition of “Go Tell It on The Mountain.”

The turning point for the Civil Rights Movement had become a reality. President Johnson tried a defensive move of scheduling a press conference to avoid Hamer being broadcast on the news but failed, news stations circulated her speech and later on she became a national symbol of the movement. Hamer openly challenged political structures, structural violence and systematic oppression; as well as, warning people that it was a tactic of the “white man” to place Black men and women in opposition of each other. By dividing the Black community, white men could gain leverage and keep oppressions in place. She also warned, “Anything given to them by the white man was to be considered a loan, stripped way when they decided they wanted it back” (Hamer, 226).

Hamer challenged notions of who had the right to speak and perform activist work, stating “Whether you have a Ph.D., D.D., or no D, we’re in this bag together. And whether
you’re from Morehouse or Nohouse, we’re still in this bag together. Not to fight to try to liberate ourselves from men—this is another trick to get us fighting among ourselves—but to work together with the Black man, then we will have a better chance to just act as human beings, and to be treated as human beings in our sick society” (McMillen, 1972). As a wife and mother, Hamer faced obstacles some of us cannot imagine in the name of justice. Often being considered as uneducated and irrelevant, Hamer was relentless in the struggle for equality (For instance, Coretta Scott King refused to share the platform due to Hamer’s lack of grammar and confines when speaking.) Kay Mills describes, Hamer in her book, *This Little Light of Mine*, based on Hamer’s life, “her unlettered voice gave her words a power that no amount of grammatical correctness has infused” (Mills, 85). Fighting the struggle and facing death, Fannie Lou Hamer often sang, “This Little Light of Mine,” saying, “If I fall, I will fall 5’ 4” face down, in the name of freedom. I am not backing off that” (Hamer, 103). Hamer was aware of the dangers she faced and would not be subdued from fighting for justice, even if it caused her death.

Fannie Lou Hamer always made it clear she was working toward liberation for all people, although she had no desire to be liberated from her husband. Little has been written about the familial life of Hamer. If you piece together all the things revealed about the household of Hamer you will find she had a non-traditional relationship with her husband in many ways. While many women chose to support their husbands during their struggles, Pap Hamer was the one making provisions to assist in making Hamer’s crusade possible. He kept the household going while Hamer travelled promoting social justice. One instance of their dedication to each other and the struggle is recalled in Chana Kia Lee’s, *For Freedom’s Sake*, quoting Hamer, “They take me from my husband and they take my home from me. But in the next election, I will be there, voting just as much as white folks vote” (Lee, 42). Hamer also recalls in her memoir
that she was sometimes the despondency of husband, but Pap never left her alone unless economies required his absence. Pap said, “From the moment she got up in the morning until the moment she went to bed, she had people in the house, seeking help” (Hamer, 18).

Hamer never gave birth to children; however, she raised two daughters. One of the daughters she and Pap raised was taken in by them because the baby’s mother was unwed and did not feel she could take care of the baby. The second daughter was taken in when she had been badly burned by a tub of boiling water. The poverty-stricken family could not afford to take care of the child. Hamer always said that she wanted more children and felt that they could have taken care of more. The Hamers had a lot of love to give even if not a lot of material wealth. Hamer was forced to forgo giving birth to children, however, in her early forties. Even though most would consider a woman in her forties to be past childbearing years, it was not the age factor that took away the hope for more children for the Hamers.

A common practice among marginalized communities was forced sterilization. In 1961, Hamer went into the hospital for a routine procedure to remove a non-cancerous uterine tumor, yet while the doctors were carrying out the surgery Hamer was given a full hysterectomy. A clear representation of the way marginalized women’s choices were revoked. Chana Kai Lee writes in her book *For Freedom’s Sake*, the way the absence of choices can manifest within a woman as a loss of self. Lee writes,

She lost not only her capacity to reproduce, but everything that it symbolized for women, especially Black women living in a desperately poor, rural environment and possessing nothing that was truly theirs, save faith and their own bodies. Physically, she had been robbed of an important aspect of her creative capacity, and this must have affected her view of self, especially her gendered, sexual self. (Lee, 81)
This would be one area Hamer would address politically less than a decade later. She fought to give women the right to their reproductive bodies, though never advocated for abortion rights.

Fannie Lou Hamer had a political vision. She was more concerned with saving America as a whole than simply gaining civil rights. Her motivation came from a deep instilled belief handed to her from her mother. Hamer’s mother taught her to respect herself. Her mother became very disturbed when young Fannie Lou asked why they had to be Black. Her mother taught her to always love herself even if those around her did not (Hamer, 11). She maintained a sense of integrity and believed that it was up to the individual to reject injustices. While Dorothy Height was deemed the “Godmother of the Civil Rights Movement”, Fannie Lou Hamer was considered a “mama” in the fight for justice. The mamas took on the daunting tasks of being more outspoken and more militant or radical. It was this which would create much adversity for Hamer during her days of activism. They were more willing to place themselves deep within the struggle, “willing to catch hell, having already caught their share’ (Lee, xii).

Willing to place yourself this profoundly into the struggle often meant you became victim to the structural violence that was a central deterrent of political and social activism. Hamer was a victim of several disabilities due to her involvement in the struggle. The beating she received in Mississippi left her with a sever limp, essentially blind in one eye, and deaf in one ear. Oppressors did not spare women the violence that was often thought to be saved for the men involved in the revolution for justice. Hamer would tell about the beating many times throughout her career as an activist, but some things were left unsaid. Hamer maintained a code of silence about many injustices she endured personally.
Either as a defense mechanism or maybe it was the time in which Hamer was raised, when Black women were taught not to discuss their sexual being, and retain the politics of respectability, which led Hamer to only vaguely discuss the insinuation of sexual assault while incarcerated in Winona. It could have also been out of respect to her husband that had suffered enough already due to her dedication to her work. However, Hamer did talk of trying to hold her dress down during the severe beating she received, and are left to wonder if she was hiding some kind of sexual assault as well. In one interview about the beating in Winona she would say one of guards “had gotten so hot and worked up off the beatings that he had to join in,” (Lee, 51). She spoke out against sterilization, but rarely spoke of her own forced situation. She seldom spoke of the babies she gave birth to that were born dead. While many would say Hamer’s rhetoric left little to the imagination, if you read about her enough you begin to wonder what else she might have suffered, which she never publicly revealed. Through swollen lips, one word from another activist lifted Hamer’s spirit; the fellow activists mumbled the word “Freedom” (Lee, 50). Recently heard a great writer, speaker, and scholar, Dr. M. Jacqui Alexander say, “The body does not forget abuse. The mind does not forget abuse. And the spirit does not forget abuse” (3rd Annual Recovering Black Women's Voices and Lives Symposium, Oct. 20, 2011).

Hamer’s body suffered greatly from all the travelling, stress, and malnourishment she had been subjected to during her childhood and activist years. The constant worry and lack of sleep led Hamer’s mind into decline (Lee, 163). Many would say she was crazy for doing the work she did but in fact it was the structural resistance to her work that would cause the toll on her body, not the work itself. She was hospitalized many times for exhaustion and suffered a nervous breakdown. It was rare that she would give her body time to heal though, there was always work to be done.
The violence that affected Hamer and many Black people in the South was adopted by the Black Power movement. They believed if you were under attack it was your inherent right to attack back with as much force as necessary to alleviate your oppression. While Hamer appeared on the surface to be a matriarch, a caring and motherly woman, it cannot be overlooked that she did not adhere to the notion of turning the other cheek. Many of her speeches and actions carried an undertone of resentment and violence if provoked. She had grown tired of seeing freedom seekers attacked and began to speak in more militant tones. She began to evolve with the movement and realized that nonviolent tactics were being replaced by a more straight forward approach.

Hamer had been raised in a Christian home and still observed her Christian beliefs, however, as with many Southern families; firm talk and strict rules were dominating in Southern religion. Hamer had no problem negotiating her revolutionary self and her divinely inspired self. Hamer was traditional, yet willing to move with the times. In *For Freedom’s Sake*, Lee expresses, “Hamer lived in a harsh and violent world where threatening, profane utterances were commonplace. Neither was her verbalization considered sacrilegious or hypocritical to one’s sanctified beliefs and worldview,” (Lee, 131). She placed calls to action and became disappointed when people were not willing to step up to the challenge. She viewed the fight for justice to belong to everyone, regardless of race, class, or gender. The time for engaging the empathy of oppressors had passed and she was now ready for a new approach.

Hamer would learn that it was not always just your oppressors that could make you feel discomfort. After Hamer began to embrace working with white people on the issues related to social justice and civil rights, she lost the support of many who had been loyal to her before. She was rejected by SNCC due to her involvement with white activists. This fact was buried deep
inside her soul and she would not manifest the pain until later when she was suffering from a
bout of depression. She had been told that she had no place in SNCC anymore and this would be
excruciating for Hamer. The worry that she had about her family life would also lead to
depression. Pap Hamer was a staunch supporter but would complain that she was gone from
home too much. An irrevocable event took place shortly after her expulsion from SNCC, her
daughter would succumb to her battle with malnutrition; a death that could have possibly been
avoided if the hospital had not turned her away due to her race.

Hamer’s role as a mother was extremely important to her; however, it was not something
she spoke of publicly often. Her children were not brought into the public eye because Hamer
knew firsthand how demeaning and cruel individuals could be. Her struggle with, Dorothy, her
daughter who died from effects of malnourishment was just one result of structural violence and
systematic oppression. Her youngest daughter would also prove to be an advocate for change.
While Hamer was content to do the work of desegregating, it was daunting for her when her
daughter chose to follow in her footsteps. Hamer’s daughter, Virgie, chose to attend an all-white
school in Ruleville, Mississippi. Hamer explained the situation as follows, “As we approached
the door, my daughter noticed a slight hesitation on my part. Virgie insisted that I come on. I
remember this with a mixture of shame and pride. It’s hard when it is your child and she is not
afraid” (Lee, 168). It was a revelation that Hamer felt fear at this time, when so many other times
she had faced down threats on her own life.

After all of the fighting Hamer had done for the citizens of the poverty stricken and
racially charged South, she would realize that once your body and mind have passed their prime,
you are no good to them anymore. Hamer suffered a nervous breakdown in 1972. She was
dismayed to realize that she could not find anyone to come help her at home or even to do simple
things like comb her hair. Pap was spending more time away from home to try to save the family from financial hardship. Hamer would spend her final days alone, sitting in a rocking chair, wondering where the people who she helped were when she needed assistance.

Fannie Lou Hamer would not consider herself a feminist by the conventional sense of the word. She had no intention of liberating herself from domestic duties, when she was at home to perform them, or from her husband. Circumstances would lead her to a feminist life. Like many Black women of her time and prior, it was not an issue of feminism; it was an issue of survival. Julian Bond answered the question shortly after Hamer’s death, of who actually discovered Fannie Lou Hamer, as if she was an entertainer, rather than a revolutionary warrior, in his words, “She discovered herself, celebrated herself, lived for herself and her people, and she died because she could not stop trying” (Mills, 313).
Chapter Five: Conclusion

By exploring the lived experiences of these three women the reader can better understand how race, class, gender, ability, and education intersect to make each woman’s story unique. Their stories parallel due to their beliefs of equality. They are admirable because they were relentless in their struggle for social justice. The three women in this paper were influenced early in their lives by their mothers and by different circumstances in their lives. They started to actively fight against oppressions because they had very strong beliefs in social justice and wanted to help create a better life for themselves, their children, and everyone. They endured struggles, abuse, and adversity because they rejected the status quo, and challenged white, male patriarchy.

I chose these three women because their experiences are separated by race, class, and education. However, their common goal was the same, equality. I also found their avenues of activism interesting. Height was from a middle-class, educated, Northern Black family. Her activism relied heavily on her experiences as a Black female, her education, negotiation skills, and connections with prominent citizens. Liuzzo was from a poor, white family, from the South. She was only educated through the ninth grade until she would return to academe later in her life. Her activism was a result of being brought up in a poor area, witnessing segregation daily; she was also drawn by a spiritual, not religious connection. Hamer, born into a sharecropping family, knew the struggles of oppression firsthand. She had worked in the fields all of her life, struggling to gain some formal education. Her activism came from the instilled value of self-worth and the
desire to break the cycle of oppression which had plagued her and her people all of her life and prior generations.

When you research activism it is important to look at every aspect of the work. Many people rewrite history omitting occurrences they deem to be less than academic or which come from people who are not considered scholars. Often lived experiences and spiritual connections are dismissed. However, if you dismiss these things you are erasing a significant portion of the story. It is also important not to separate scholars from the community in which they work. Often in history people read about the educated activists and not about the actual struggle the communities they were advocating for were facing. The women I focused my research on were not concerned with distinctiveness for their work, nor were they concerned with credit for their effort; they simply wanted to create a better world in which to live.

The dangers that each woman faced were genuine. The results of these dangers are clear in the stories of Hamer and Liuzzo. While Hamer was disabled from the beating that she endured, Liuzzo lost her life to the struggle. Not only were the dangers of bodily harm in place, you must also look at the ways women were discredited for their involvement in this type of activism. Deemed insane, crazy, emotionally unstable, and too spirited to be taken seriously, the reputations of Hamer and Liuzzo were also at stake. Hamer’s husband would be speculated as weak because his wife was not under his control, and Liuzzo was supposed a bad mother and wife. She was also portrayed as erratic and unstable, often succumbing to fits of hysteria.

Mary Stanton discusses implications of disability in *Selma to Sorrow*,

Why is it important for some journalists and commentators to insinuate that rather than being genuinely motivated by a desire to help the civil rights movement or even frustrated by the lack of opportunities for personal growth that were
available to women of her generation, Vi Liuzzo must have been mentally ill.
(Stanton, 109)

While this is the discourse which surrounded Liuzzo is also important to point out that the same systems of structural violence would eventually lead Hamer to mental breakdown. Her body, mind, and soul capitulated to the violence and deceit that she endured. Out of the three women I discussed in my research, it appears Height would be the only woman to escape from the discourse of disability; possibly from her ability to disagree while still depicting a façade of conformity.

By investigating these women from a feminist perspective it is clear to see how they were empowered by their activism. Knowing the dangers and choosing to combat oppression anyway is a testament to their characters. Height had to battle sexism and racism to join the struggle. Liuzzo had to battle sexism, racism, classism, and to shed her white privilege to become a freedom fighter. Hamer had to overcome sexism, classism, racism, and the interpretation of being an ignorant woman in order to join in the Civil Rights Movement. The benefits of this research include finding ways to overcome adversity in order to fight oppression, learning effective methods of action, and proving it does not matter where or how you were born or raised in terms of battling oppressive system.

Racism, sexism, and classism are still predominant in our nation; we are now fighting to remove immigrants, in a land built on immigration. While most people will not admit to maintaining racist beliefs, they are not willing to renounce their privileges. The three women in this paper would look at us today and wonder why so many of us stood aside and watch racial profiling enacted again, after they fought so relentlessly to eliminate it. Their legacies continue to challenge us to fight systems of oppression and violence, and for that I am thankful. And it is
because of women like them that I will continue the struggle through activist scholarship, never allowing their struggle to be forgotten. The only path to freedom and democracy is through equality.
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