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African-American Women Leaders after 1950s

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

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V Praze dne 2. 5. 2015 Veronika Rybková

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objection to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Thesis abstract

The thesis attempts truthfully to illustrate a situation of black female leaders active in the United States of the second half of the twentieth century. In order to cover this period, four black women activists will be focused on as representatives of two different generations. On the one hand, Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer will stand for the older generation because their activist careers culminated in the 1960s. On the other hand, Angela Davis and bell hooks will represent the subsequent decades as it was at that time when their careers matured. A comparison of the two generations will reveal considerable similarities in the four women's perspective on the nature of the struggle against white supremacy. It is necessary to bear in mind that this perspective was to a great extent influenced by a special kind of oppression the women faced as members of a marginalized group, that is, of the black community. Firstly, a detailed examination of the women's childhood and youth will show that it was already at that time when the four black women realized the presence of racism in their lives. Moreover, the focus on their background also introduces similar motives of the four women's decision to become active participants in the black community's struggle.

Secondly, after the description of the specific activist focus of each woman, the thesis will further emphasize that the discussed activists were forced to cope with a sexist oppression solely applicable on them as a result of their gender. Therefore, the black women's oppression should be understood as a multilayered phenomenon because it is actually a combination of various kinds of oppression, sexism and racism being the most easily recognizable components. Notably, the thesis challenges an assumption that white men were the sole perpetrators of this complex oppression as it demonstrates the black men's disapproving responses to the black women's decision of adopting the active role in the community leadership. Significantly, it is mainly in connection with the black male sexism that a considerable difference between the two generations will be presented. As the thesis will argue, Baker's and Hamer's refusal to challenge sexism they experienced can be contrasted with Davis' and hooks' readiness to identify themselves as advocates of feminism. Although the difference between the women's attitude to sexism is worth of exploration, the thesis' comparison of the four activists primarily highlights the characteristic aspects of the black female activism. As the women were influenced by the complex and unique oppression, their perspective should be considered special.

Interestingly, it has only been within the last two decades that the black female activism is paid attention to in the historiographers' accounts. As the thesis will highlight, this omission or ignorance of the black female contributions to the anti-racist and/or anti-sexist struggle could be easily regarded as yet another layer of the black women's oppression. Still, as will be proved by the examination of the four women's legacy, the black female activism definitely deserves recognition and acknowledgment. Therefore, the author of the thesis will promote the understanding of the black female perspective as especially enriching and beneficial for the black community in the United States.

Abstrakt práce

Tato bakalářská práce se snaží autenticky popsat situaci afroamerických aktivistek činných ve Spojených státech druhé poloviny dvacátého století. Aby bylo toto období řádně vystiženo, byly vybrány čtyři afroamerické aktivistky jako představitelky dvou různých generací. Ella Baker a Fannie Lou Hamer budou zastupovat starší generaci, neboť jejich kariéry vrcholily v šedesátých letech minulého století. Angela Davis a bell hooks pak reprezentují následující dekády, protože právě v té době jejich aktivismus dozrával. Srovnání těchto dvou generací odhalí mnohé styčné body v postoji, který zmíněné čtyři ženy zaujaly k boji proti bělošské nadvládě. Je podstatné si uvědomit, že onen postoj byl do značné míry ovlivněn zvláštním typem útisku, kterému byly ženy vystaveny jako členky okrajové skupiny, přesněji řečeno afroamerické komunity. Podrobný průzkum jejich dětství a dospívání prokáže, že si ženy už v tomto období uvědomovaly přítomnost rasismu v svých životech. Toto zkoumání rovněž odhalí podobné důvody, které je vedly k rozhodnutí stát se aktivními účastnicemi v boji komunity.

Poté, co bude popsáno specifické aktivistické zaměření každé z nich, práce zdůrazní, že aktivistky musely čelit také sexistickému útisku, který je namířen výlučně proti ženám. V důsledku toho bychom útisk afroamerických žen měli chápat jako mnohovrstevný fenomén, protože se vlastně jedná o kombinaci různých druhů útisku, z nichž rasismus a sexismus jsou nejsnáze identifikovatelnými složkami. Práce ovšem zpochybňuje předpoklad, že bílí muži byli výhradními pachateli tohoto komplexního utlačování, proto zmiňuje i afroamerické muže a jejich nesouhlasné odezvy na rozhodnutí žen zaujmout aktivní role ve vůdcovství komunity. Značný rozdíl mezi dvěma generacemi je uveden právě v souvislosti se sexismem afroamerických mužů. Práce dokazuje, že odmítnutí poukazovat na sexismus na straně Baker a Hamer lze postavit do opozice proti pohotovosti, se kterou se Davis a hooks označily jako zastánkyně feminismu. Přestože rozpor mezi ženami a jejich postojem k sexismu rozhodně stojí za řádné prozkoumání, v práci by srovnání čtyř aktivistek mělo především zdůraznit charakteristické rysy afroamerického ženského aktivismu. Vzhledem k tomu, že ženy byly ovlivněny složitým a proto jedinečným útiskem, měli bychom i jejich postoje vnímat jako unika.

Je pozoruhodné, že v záznamech historiografů je afroamerickému ženskému aktivismu věnována pozornost až v posledních dvou desetiletích. Práce poukazuje na to, že toto opomenutí nebo dokonce ignoraci zásluh afroamerických aktivistek v boji proti rasismu či

sexismu lze chápat jako další vrstvu specifického útisku žen. Výzkum odkazu čtyř aktivistek prokáže, že afroamerický ženský aktivismus rozhodně zasluhuje uznání. Autorka práce proto hájí vnímání pohledu afroamerických žen jako prvku, který mimořádně obohacuje afroamerickou komunitu ve Spojených státech.

Key words

Ella Baker

Fannie Lou Hamer

Angela Davis

bell hooks

African-American activism

leadership

feminism

racism

sexism

civil rights movement

multilayered oppression

Klíčová slova

Ella Baker

Fannie Lou Hamer

Angela Davis

bell hooks

afroamerický aktivismus

vůdcovství

feminismus

rasismus

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The thesis focuses on black[1] activists and leaders within the context of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. The author's choice of subject matter might seem somewhat surprising; mainly because one could argue that much has already been written about the civil rights movement and its heroes like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Stokely Carmichael. Importantly, such an argument, although hypothetical, demonstrates a kind of simplistic thinking that the thesis intends to challenge. Firstly, while the civil rights era marked a decisive moment in the history of the black community in the United States, the black activism and the debates about the leadership structure have not ceased in the decades following the 1960s. For this reason, the thesis focuses both on the personalities connected to the civil rights movement and on those whose activist careers climaxed in the subsequent decades. Secondly, while it can be admitted that there is a substantial amount of accounts that focus on the black *male* leaders, at the same time it must be remembered that their *female* counterparts in struggle have only recently gained the historiographers' attention. According to Vicki Crawford, it has only been within the last decade of the twentieth century that historians turned to consider the important roles played by female activists in the struggle for social change, and, in connection with the civil rights era, Crawford also emphasizes that such marginalization of the black female activists has significantly obscured the overall understanding of the movement's leadership[2].

Although historian Kathryn Nasstrom asserts that "the association of leadership with men is an exceedingly stubborn one"[3], for the sake of clarity it should rather be reformulated that the thesis deals with black female leaders and activists. As has already been foreshadowed, the sole focus on black women leaders impugns traditional assumptions about leadership of the black community in America. An exemplary traditional assumption is the belief that only men are qualified to lead and that women should play the role of providers of support for male leaders. As Erica R. Edwards confirms:

[1] Although the author of the thesis is aware of the fact that the term 'African-American' is currently considered as the politically correct variant, she has decided to employ the term 'black' throughout the thesis. This should be understood as a choice made chiefly for the sake of consistency and resulting from the fact that the vast majority of both primary and secondary sources preferred the variant 'black'.

[2] Vicki Crawford, "African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements,* ed. Betty Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 121.

[3] Erica R. Edwards, *Difference Incorporated: Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 11.

> "[The] attributes of the ideal leader are the traits American society usually conceives as rightly belonging to men or to normative masculinity: ambition, courage, and above all, divine calling. It is for this reason, for example, that black female leaders have often either been written out of history […] or subjected to violent gender policing"[4].

Within the context of the black community in the United States, this association of leadership qualities with men has several reasons. On the one hand, it is connected with the historical fact that black women have displayed such an extraordinary fidelity to the race and to black men that when they finally speak up for themselves they are viewed almost as traitors of the community. On the other hand, there is a widespread myth that any successful black woman emasculates her black man, as Cornel West admits: "You hear over and over again how talented women are threatening and intimidating to men in general and Black men in particular"[5]. Due to this shared belief in the threat that able or simply active women pose for men, it is then obvious that any black woman who decides to become involved in community leadership and leave her subservient position is actually challenging the traditional assumptions and widespread myths concerning the division of male and female roles. Moreover, as the thesis illustrates, some black women activists deliberately focused on the refutation of such myths as a part of their activist interest. Importantly, according to West, to address and challenge such cultural stereotypes as these is crucial because it is where people must begin in order to engage in a serious discussion of race and gender in America[6].

With respect to the above-mentioned observations it can be concluded that the contributions of black female activists have frequently been overlooked and not sufficiently appreciated but this fact should be understood as merely one of the reasons why the thesis focuses on the black female activists. Specifically, four women have been chosen as representatives of black female activism in the United States for the thesis' purpose. Firstly, Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer stand for the civil rights era. Retrospectively, 1960s, which is the era when their activism reached its peak, is often understood as a time when it was particularly difficult for women to assume leadership roles. Sharon Harley thus explains:

> "Black women who assumed leadership positions traditionally occupied by black men were often subjected to criticism, even ridicule, within black institutions and communities. This tendency to denigrate the contributions of

[4] Edwards 21.
[5] bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1991) 120.
[6] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 6.

> African-American women to black freedom struggles to some extent helps to explain their absence from many historical accounts of these movements"[7].

Secondly, Angela Davis and bell hooks represent the decades following the civil rights movement's climax because their activism matured at that time. Importantly, both women are actively involved in the academic field even today and due to their academic achievements they should be acknowledged not only as activists but also as influential intellectuals. Notably, hooks rightly pointed out that "[when] Black scholars write about Black intellectual life they usually focus solely on the lives and works of Black men"[8].

The decision to focus on women of two different generations naturally invites a sustained comparison of Baker and Hamer on the on hand and Davis and hooks on the other. This leads to an identification of various common denominators of the four activists' perspective. For instance, the activists' membership in the black community has played a crucial role for all women in their determination to become actively involved in the anti-racist and/or anti-sexist struggle. Therefore, the first chapter provides a necessary examination of Baker's, Hamer's, Davis', and hooks' background. Not only is it natural that activists were shaped by the larger circumstances in which they found themselves, but West also highlights the influence of the background in his assertion that quality leadership actually "comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons"[9]. Moreover, their background also influenced the respective foci of the four women's activism, which are described in greater detail in the second chapter.

At this point, another reason for the author's decision to focus on the black female leaders can be introduced. The activism of Baker, Hamer, Davis, and hooks definitely deserves attention because it offers a unique perspective on the nature of the black community's struggle and its members' situation within the context of white American supremacy. The notable aspect of the four women's view lies in the fact that it was significantly influenced by their experience as members of the black community, that is, of a marginalized group. What such experience actually looks like has been articulated by West: "After centuries of racist degradation, exploitation, and oppression in America, being black means being minimally subject to white supremacist abuse and being part of a rich culture and community that has struggled against

[7] Sharon Harley, "Chronicle of a Death Foretold", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements,* ed. Betty Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 189.
[8] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 150.
[9] West 56.

such abuse"[10]. As this articulation is applicable to both black men and women it is crucial to read this as an incomplete description of the four black activists' experience because as women they also suffered specific abuse aimed at them as a result of their sex. Accordingly, the character of the oppression that the women activists dealt with is illustrated in the third chapter of the thesis. Importantly, in contrast with the prevailing affinities in the four women's views, this chapter also reveals the most prominent difference between the two generations, which is closely connected with the women's attitude to the gender-specific oppression they experienced.

[10] West 39.

Chapter 2: The ascent to activism- the examination of childhood and youth

It is a well-known fact that childhood experience has a profound effect on forming one's character and attitudes. It is therefore useful to examine and compare the backgrounds of the women activists in question because it was in their childhood and youth years when the influences that eventually led them to question the everyday reality of the black community within the American context came into play. As is going to be illustrated in this chapter, one should rather speak about an interplay of influences coming both from white supremacy and from within the black community. Although during their childhood years the women primarily witnessed trouble and hardship that then had a profound effect on their ascent to activist careers, it is crucial to remember that their families and communities equipped them with certain positive aspects, such as accounts of family histories, practical skills, and healthy self-confidence. Significantly, it is remarkable to notice an especially close bond between the four women and the female members of their families.

Furthermore, as childhood usually involves a progress to formal education, the chapter will focus on the extent of education the women were actually able to obtain as it is an area where profound differences among them can be found. In their effort to get access to education, the young women struggled to remove obstacles stemming from white supremacy but interestingly also from their parents who were not always sure about the necessity of educational pursuit. It will be demonstrated that for some of the women it was the university settings where they behaved as activists for the first time and where they became aware of the contrasts of their situation and that of the majority of white students. Moreover, the university environment also introduced women to the subtle ways that racism and sexism could be spread, which undoubtedly had an effect on their decision to become active. To summarize, the chapter will manifest the necessity to examine the childhood and youth years of the four women activists because it is there where the stimuli of their activist can be found.

Having been brought up in the segregated South, all four activists became soon aware of the racial injustice their family and community had to cope with. Angela Davis was brought up in one of the most segregated cities in the South, Birmingham, Alabama and asserted: "Because of the mandatory character of the black community in which I grew up I came to experience it as somewhat suffocating and desperately sought a way out"[1]. Also Fannie Lou Hamer in her childhood reminiscences described the progress of getting sicker and sicker about the system

[1] Joy James, *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1998) 290.

and promised herself that if she had a chance she would do something for the black people of the South as she "was determined to see that things were changed"[2]. Interestingly, both Davis and Hamer often referred back to specific events that changed their view on the world. Whereas Davis claimed that it was the death of the four black girls in the church bombing which made her believe "that when racism is in power, the children suffer […] far more than those of us who feel that we are its most deeply wounded victims"[3], Hamer repeatedly claimed "the murder of the family's farm animals by a white man terribly unsettled by the mere thought that some black people were making too much progress"[4] to be the crucial event of her childhood years.

It would be wrong to assume that the sources of the activists' trouble always came from the outside world as it happened in the situations mentioned above. In reflecting on her intellectual development, bell hooks asserted that "growing up in a family with strong elements of dysfunctionality, where [she] was psychologically wounded and at times physically hurt, the primary force which kept [her] going […] was critical engagement with ideas"[5]. Moreover, she claimed that her feminist awakening came as a result of growing up in a traditional patriarchal household where patriarchy meant absolute rule by the father. By daily witnessing her father's fierceness and the privileges her only brother got as opposed to five older sisters, hooks soon realized not only that the inequity of their household was gender-based but she was also able to appreciate her non-dominating grandfather who stood for an alternative model of black masculinity[6]. According to hooks, the varying degrees of patriarchal tyranny led her "to question the politics of male dominance and enabled [her] to resist sexist socialization"[7] which confirms the decisive role that her family circumstances played in her progress to an unshakeable feminist stance.

It is necessary to note that it was not only negative experiences that transformed the women into activists. The fact that Ella Baker in her public addresses "returned again and again to the stories of slavery that her grandparents had bequeathed to her"[8] serves as an instance of a rather enriching family influence. As Joanne Grant confirms: "From [her] extended family

[2] Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 13.
[3] Angela Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 105.
[4] Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 15.
[5] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 66.
[6] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 69.
[7] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984) 10.
[8] J.Todd Moye, *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013) 10.

[Baker] learned the values that would sustain her throughout her life: a sense of community and a deep-felt recognition of the importance of sharing"[9]. This illustrates not only an awareness of common history in the black families but also a parental willingness to equip one's children with the right values, which Davis rightly acknowledged: "I was proud that both my parents were determined to defend my right to seek an independent, revolutionary answer to the oppression of our people"[10].

The focus on positive stimuli to their rise to activism points to a prominent feature common to the four activists- the crucial role of their relationships with their female relatives, especially mothers. All four women's memories show extremely tight bonds to their mothers and/or grandmothers who played various roles in their lives and seemed to influence the women profoundly as Kay Mills confirms that "[Hamer] herself pointed to her mother as one of the strongest influences on her life"[11]. Firstly, courageous women in the families functioned as models and sources of inspiration for the children. This was prominent in Baker's situation as she admitted: "I became active in things largely because my mother was very active in the field of religion". Baker's mother who "exercised her leadership and activism under the auspices of the Baptist church"[12] was undoubtedly responsible for two things. On the one hand, despite gradually developing an anticlerical stance Baker remained a devoted Christian and churchgoer[13]. On the other hand, Baker later as an organizer opposed the top-down church model descending from pulpit to the pew because she drew upon a model of "church-based activism [and] the work of the women's missionary societies that women like her mother had perfected early in the twentieth century"[14].

Secondly, inspiring grandmothers figured prominently in both hooks' and Davis' development. While Davis remembered her grandmother as "a symbol of strength, of age, wisdom and suffering"[15], hooks saw her grandmother as a kind of educator "sharing the legacy of her quilt-making, of family history, of her incredible way with words"[16]. hooks proves to be not the only one who was in some way educated by a female relative. Davis' mother, for instance, taught her daughter how to read before she reached her fourth year and she even established a quota system for the number of books her daughter was supposed to

[9] Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998) 12.
[10] Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1974) 223.
[11] Mills 17.
[12] Moye 20.
[13] Moye 107.
[14] Moye 93.
[15] Davis *An Autobiography* 82.
[16] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989) 82.

read per week[17]. In comparison, in her children's education Hamer's mother focused on a more ideological dimension. Because she deeply believed in the beauty of blackness, she taught her daughter to respect herself as a little black child and consequently as a black woman. As a result, though Hamer "never really saw herself as beautiful she had an inner confidence in herself"[18].

It was due to that confidence that Hamer was determined to deny any stereotypical assumptions and myths about her appearance. When a white lady naively assumed that any successful black woman must be of small stature and very light skin and therefore also Fannie Lou Hamer must look so, it was Hamer herself who informed her: "No, I'm a big black woman"[19]. To accept themselves as black females within the world of white supremacy and its ideals of beauty was of crucial importance for the women's activism and necessary self-evaluation. Importantly, it was not only other women's hypocrisy that the black women had to cope with as West highlights: "The ideals of White beauty, when it comes to women, are so deeply inscribed in every male psyche, Black and White, that many brothers do have problems acknowledging Black beauty"[20]. Thus in the world of activism which has always been full of confrontation with stereotypically thinking humans of both sexes, the embracement of one's appearance was a crucial step. Already early in childhood Davis decided she "would never- and [she] was very categorical about this- never harbor or express the desire to be white"[21] which was probably a result of her family influence and later a part of her confidence.

Aside from being thus educated within their family units and communities, an insight into the activists' formal education shows that their school and in some cases also college attendance also ranks among the forming factors of their youth. It is worth noting that there are differences among the women both in the level of education they attained and in their reflections on their formal education as such. Not only did Hamer grow up in Mississippi, which spent less on black children's education than any other state at that time, but she differs profoundly from the other women in the fact that she was forced to leave school after her sixth grade to help and support her family[22]. In the late 1960s she observed: "I may not have

[17] Davis, *An Autobiography* 97.
[18] Earnest N. Bracey, *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2011) 16.
[19] Mills 264.
[20] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 115.
[21] Davis, *An Autobiography* 85.
[22] Mills 12.

all the education but I do have common sense and I know how to treat people"[23]. Although she might not have seen her educational deficit as an impediment to her organizing activities, Earnest N. Bracey, one of her biographers, speculates that this deficit was one of the reasons for Hamer's departure from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (henceforth SNCC) as he comments: "Perhaps some of the college-educated blacks in the movement thought that Hamer's lack of education was a hindrance[24]".

In contrast to Hamer, Baker, Davis, and hooks were highly educated. Baker spent nine years as a student at Shaw Academy and subsequently University and it could be said that"[n]ext to the church, Shaw was the most important institution in Ella Baker's early life [where] Baker had her first real experience of blacks and whites working together with a common purpose"[25]. Moreover, it was at Shaw where Baker first adopted the role of an organizer and activist. She not only launched a protest concerning strict dress code of female students, but she also fought for the right of male and female students to walk across the campus together; and her continuous pursuit of fairness and taking up causes of those she felt were wrongly accused led to her being called a troublemaker. In the course of her senior year it was only her excellent grades which prevented her expulsion by the university headquarters[26].

Similarly to Baker, Davis also did not hesitate to become a part of the action, and it was already at the age of fifteen when she "became active in a youth organization associated with the Communist Party"[27]. Moreover, while studying philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, Davis, in her search for black student companions, decided to organize a Black Student Union and was astonished to realize that she was being looked upon as a kind of leader of the black movement of the university as she never sought out this position[28]. Finally, in her reminiscences about her studying at Stanford University, hooks admitted her eager response "to the fervor over [the] contemporary feminist movement on campus [as she] took classes, went to meetings, [and] to all-women's parties"[29]. In this sense Hamer differed profoundly from the highly-educated three because it was as late as when she was forty-four

[23] Mills, 249.
[24] Bracey 146.
[25] Moye 23.
[26] Grant 21-3.
[27] James 2.
[28] Davis, *An Autobiography* 156-7.
[29] hooks, *Talking Back* 149.

years old and attempted to vote for the first time that her involvement with the civil rights struggle began[30].

Whereas Baker's biographers often simply focused on the positive influences of her university attendance and experience, Davis and hooks in their writings repeatedly stated that their educational processes influenced them both positively and negatively and that their progress to education was rather complex. As they started to display intellectual ambitions already in their youth, they had to persuade their parents that the pursuit of mind-enriching activities has its worth. hooks openly admitted a certain difficulty she had when talking about her parents and their impact on her "because they have always felt wary, ambivalent, mistrusting about [her] intellectual aspirations even as they have been caring and supportive"[31]. Like Davis' mother, hooks' parents also provided their daughter with access to books but they did not hesitate to threaten to throw them away if she did not conform to their other expectations and their ambivalent approach led hooks to question the significance of intellectual endeavor as such[32].

Davis had to confront her parents' fears that leaving home for a university campus would make her mature before her time but Davis already knew that "any Black child growing up in the South is forced to mature 'before her time' anyway"[33]. While she felt little distress and was eager to leave home and pursue her studies, her reflections demonstrated mixed feelings, some of which are almost identical with that of hooks. To begin with, there was a sense of alienation, loneliness, and isolation. As there were only two other black students at Brandeis University at her time, Davis "felt alienated, angry, alone and would have left the campus if [she] had the courage and had known where to go"[34]. Although Stanford University exhibited a greater number of black students in hooks' time, she not only felt herself "alienated from the white people who were [her] peers and teachers, but [she] met black people who were different, who did not think the way [she] did about black culture or black life"[35]. These situations had a profound effect on these women's awareness of the specific situation of women of color and especially black women in the context of white supremacy.

[30] Chana Kai Lee, "Anger, Memory, and Personal Power: Fannie Lou Hamer and Civil Rights Leadership", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements*, ed. Collier-Thomas Betty and V. P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 141.
[31] hooks, *Talking Back* 75.
[32] hooks, *Talking Back* 79.
[33] Davis, *An Autobiography* 104.
[34] Davis, *An Autobiography* 118.
[35] hooks, *Talking Back* 100.

It should be admitted that Davis was able to see a positive aspect of her isolation as a student. When she remembered her fifteen-month-long incarceration she claimed:

> "When I think back on that period of my life, I realize that I had an advantage over many people because I had spent many years of my life as a student. I was used to spending many hours alone, studying. I am very serious when I say that reading and writing helped me to safeguard my sanity"[36].

Still, although she accepted this advantage of her alienation, it was probably during that time as a student who got nothing for free that Davis came to realize the necessity of an active approach if one's conditions are to be improved as she claimed: "We must not presume that authentic solidarity will automatically flow from the recognition of the simple fact, that women of color are the most oppressed human beings in our society"[37].

Furthermore, hooks came to be aware of various contrasts between her situation and that of white people. It was when she came to Stanford that she began to think about class differences and suddenly understood why her working-class parents feared her entry to the campus world. Although hooks talked to no one about her financial insecurity, she also did not intend to forget her class background and it resulted in her being separated from fellow students[38]. Moreover, there were also contrasts concerning the black and white way of teaching. As to all-black schools hooks nostalgically remembered: "We were taught in those schools to be proud of ourselves as black people and to work for the uplift of our race". After coming to Stanford, she admitted that it was disheartening "to face the extent to which education at the university was not the site of openness and intellectual challenge we had longed for"[39]. In addition, when she entered the women's studies classes she observed another contrast between black and white experience. Whereas "white women were reveling in the joy of being together [hooks] had not known a life where women had not been together, where women had not helped, protected, and loved one another deeply"[40].

Significantly, the university was the site where hooks realized the subtle ways that racism can be spread as the teachers communicated their message by "forgetting to call your name when reading the roll, avoiding looking at you, pretending they do not hear you when you speak, and at times ignoring you altogether"[41]. Aside from her struggling to avoid the professors who

[36] Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012) 49.
[37] Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* 29.
[38] hooks, *Talking Back* 75.
[39] hooks, *Talking Back* 99-100.
[40] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 11.
[41] hooks, *Talking Back* 57.

made it clear that the presence of any black students in their classes was not desired, hooks gradually became aware of another bias within the university environment- the sexist one. While she remembered wonderful and inspiring black women teachers from her segregated school, at none of the four universities she attended did hooks have the opportunity to study with a black woman professor[42]. Combined with her disappointment at the complete absence of material by or about black women in the women's studies courses, hooks maintained "that to be a black woman in this culture was to have a social reality that differed from that of white men, white women, and even black men[43]. hooks came to this realization within the university environment and it fuelled her life-long commitment to black feminism and intellectualism. Therefore, the important role that her education played in forming her activist perspective cannot be doubted.

In this chapter's conclusion, it is necessary once again to be aware of the influence of the activists' background on their very becoming active and willing to make things happen. Furthermore, their childhood and youth also affected their fields of focus and interest as well as the ways of getting their message across, as J. Todd Moye suggests: "[Baker's] childhood experiences in the South formed her as an organizer"[44]. And it was actually organizing that Baker excelled at. Although the women lived in different periods of time and focused on various aspects of the black community's struggle, what they had in common is that all their activities invariably stemmed from their experience, and this is a crucial contribution of black female perspective in general.

[42] hooks, *Talking Back* 56.
[43] hooks, *Talking Back* 149-50.
[44] Moye 56.

Chapter 3: The distinct features of the women's activist foci

In this chapter's introduction, vastly different circumstances of the activists' careers must be taken into account. One must bear in mind the gap of more than one generation between Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer on the one hand and Angela Davis and bell hooks on the other. Whereas the activist careers of the former two women climaxed in 1960s, the latter two are active in scholarly field even nowadays. It is then obvious that the women worked in significantly diverse conditions and thus to compare them and to try to place one's role over the other would not only be senseless but also impossible. Accordingly, the chapter will attempt to introduce the specific activist focus of each woman in respect of its relevance for the community rather than, for instance, to speculate on the extent to which hooks' intellectual understanding of activism competes with Hamer's down-to-earth attitude.

Moreover, in spite of the differences there are considerable similarities in the women's outlooks, which is due to their specific position of being black women within the context of the United States in the twentieth century. As will be demonstrated in the chapter, these similarities were both considerably specific and quite general. On the one hand, an example of a specific and concrete similarity could be the women's interest in reaching the masses of local people and establishing bonds with them. On the other hand, there are the more general similarities to be discussed. Therefore, a substantial influence of everyday experiences on the women's activist focus is going to be illustrated as the previous chapter has already established experience as the undisputable source of the activism of all women. Furthermore, a concept of the sense of community will be introduced as the most significant feature that all the activists had in common due to their specific position as black women. Before directly proceeding to the description of these unifying aspects, it is still suitable to focus on the characteristics of each woman's activism and highlight those aspects which made her unique.

While she was involved with many civil rights organizations, the driving force of Ella Baker's actions remained unchanged- she continued working "toward the goal of creating a southern mass movement"[1] which would operate on local rather than national level. Remarkably, her determination was so strong that in the pursuit of that goal Baker did not hesitate to challenge even the well-known institutions of the civil rights movement. When she despaired that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (henceforth

[1] Moye 67.

NAACP) "was not doing more to develop civil rights activists on the local level"[2], Baker left it for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (henceforth SCLC) but only because she "did not envision the SCLC as a leading civil rights organization with national recognition, but rather as a vehicle for the creation of a mass movement with indigenous leadership"[3]. Subsequently, her mass-oriented focus made Baker support the emerging student-led SNCC as she admired the decentralization of the students' efforts, its inclination toward group-centered leadership as well as the workers' willingness to develop local leaders[4]. The affiliation of a skilled elderly organizer with a group of eager students proved to be unexpectedly fruitful and mutually advantageous. Significantly, a historian Daniel Perlstein highlights Baker's tremendous influence on the SNCC's development as he comments:

> "Baker's willingness to eschew a public leadership role in order to promote self-discovery and democratic participation among SNCC activists both bolstered the emphasis on internal democracy within the new organization and became a model for SNCC organizing in the black community"[5].

Moreover, the fact that Baker was able to establish bonds with much younger people was closely related to her capacity of approaching local people. Although these people often did not identify with the civil rights struggle she "easily established rapport [with them] by expressing her genuine interest in their lives and concerns"[6]. Similarly, her genuine interest in the students' concerns and views led Baker to develop a specific style of influencing the students during the SNCC's characteristically long discussions. Her habit was of intensive listening and asking numerous questions while she offered her own opinion only when asked and thus she influenced the group as if from behind the scenes[7]. This corresponds with her opinions on leadership which Baker once summarized: "My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders"[8].

As a consequence, SNCC workers appreciated that they never felt Baker had a personal agenda[9]. Similarly, in Fannie Lou Hamer's view one's agenda was determined by the most pressing community needs. According to Chana Kai Lee, Hamer's perspective could be

[2] Moye 63.
[3] Grant 117.
[4] Moye 114-16.
[5] Daniel Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools", *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 298, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/368691>, 28 Feb. 2015.
[6] Grant 46.
[7] Moye 123-28.
[8] Moye 2.
[9] Grant 132.

defined as "moral pragmatism" which involves "tending to whatever needed to be done whenever it needed to be done because this was only right"[10]. As Baker and SNCC were in search for leadership capacities among local people, Hamer was a person looking for a freedom movement and proved to be exactly the kind of natural community leader that SNCC sought. Being a poor black southern sharecropper, she was someone the movement wanted to represent[11]. Importantly, before becoming a full-time activist and organizer, Hamer worked on the plantation as a timekeeper which meant that she often served as a kind of go-between who mediated between black laborers and white landowners. It was this occupation that qualified her to become a specific type of leader within the civil rights movement's context- "a bridge leader". According to Belinda Robnett, the bridge leader "initiated ties between the social movement and the community [and] provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of the civil rights movement organizations"[12]. Hamer's role as such a leader was of immense importance because she then functioned as a mediator between the SNCC workers and the local people.

Similarly to Baker, Hamer preferred working alongside the young people in SNCC and the empowering cooperation with the youthful workers gradually established Hamer as one of the organization's leading spokespersons. It was her capacity of "touching many audiences with her dynamic speaking style and her impassioned descriptions of blacks in Mississippi"[13] that SNCC most appreciated. It was her characteristic way of giving speeches and combining them with songs which became Hamer's hallmark. Although she was "sometimes frustrated with her inability to use certain words properly"[14], it was because of her capability to capture the essence of the struggle in a language understandable to everyone that she became such a successful speaker whose "unlettered voice gave her words a power that no amount of grammatical correctness could have infused"[15]. Crucial components of her speaking performances were her songs, which Hamer understood as multifunctional devices. Whether

[10] Lee 63.
[11] Mills 41.
[12] Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101, No. 6 (May, 1996): 1664, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 2782115 >, 5 Feb. 2014.
[13] Lee 42.
[14] Bracey 140.
[15] Mills 85.

she was singing to overcome her and others' fears or to bring people together and encourage them to talk[16], her role as an unofficial song leader must be acknowledged.

It is necessary to remember that Hamer's activist contribution was not only about speaking and singing. She proved to be strongly determined and hard-working in her focus on voter registration, as she saw the right to vote as a crucial step in achieving freedom. In her own words:

> "[If] registering to vote means becoming a first-class citizen and changing the structure of our State's Government, I am determined to get every Negro in the State of Mississippi registered. By doing this, we can get the things we've always been denied rights to"[17].

It was during her tireless promoting of voting rights' advantages that Hamer began to experience a severe harassment and intimidation. As she knew that many of the civil rights workers were similarly harassed, in the early 1960s she took part in the SNCC's gathering in Greenwood, Mississippi, which aimed to demonstrate that the movement would not be intimidated by the threats. Significantly, white civil rights activist James P. Marshall acknowledges Hamer's crucial contribution to the maintenance of the organization as he claims: "Once its members had congregated in Greenwood, the Mississippi movement began to coalesce into a more ordered structure, supported in no small part by the work of Mrs. Hamer […] in her position as a SNCC field secretary"[18]. Still, despite such determination to keep the movement going, the harassment that Hamer faced should not be underestimated as Mills summarizes: "Not only had she lost her job and been jailed and beaten for her voter-registration efforts, [but she also] had had telephone threats against her life and had heard that a black man has been hired to kill her"[19]. Hypothetically, such harassment could serve to establish a common ground for Hamer and Angela Davis.

Just as Baker admired Hamer's courage and "felt that the brutality that had been directed at [Hamer] would have stopped a lesser person"[20], there are two chief reasons why Davis might have admired Hamer too. Firstly, due to her membership in the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party (henceforth BPP), Davis experienced similar threats and harassment as she later recalled: "The anti-communist and racist epithets used in the hate letters I received

[16] Mills 19.
[17] Mills 79.
[18] James P. Marshall, *Student Activist and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013) 47.
[19] Mills 90.
[20] Mills 114.

were so terrible that I do not want to say them aloud"[21]. Secondly, in her theoretical focus on violence against women, Davis repeatedly called the people's attention to "the persisting problem of sterilization abuse"[22]. Whereas Davis had a lot of luck that she only dealt with such an issue in her scholarly writing, Hamer actually experienced that because in 1961 she was sterilized without her knowledge or permission[23]. It is therefore not in forming theories but rather in her authentic experience where Hamer's contribution to the civil rights struggle is to be found.

Aside from Davis' feminist focus on sterilization and violence against women in general, a distinguishing feature of her activism and scholarly work was her preoccupation with prisoners' rights. Just as Hamer's traumatic experience led her to talk "about the inhumanity of sterilizing black women"[24], Davis' prison focus had its source in her own incarceration. It was during the time spent in the cell that Davis began observing the role of the racism-sexism nexus within the jail and/or prison system. In her autobiography, she recalled the washing machine, clothes dryer and ironing paraphernalia as sole furnishings of the day room of the female jail section. On the one hand, these machines reflected a sexist belief that women lack an essential part of their existence if they are separated from domestic chores. On the other hand, the fact that black women were ordered to do the washing if no white women volunteered to do so[25] proved the mixing of the sexist stereotype with a racist one.

Davis was able to use her prison-acquired sensitivity to discern sexist and/or racist patterns within other institutions and organizations with which she got involved. Accordingly, although she admitted a certain attraction that the BPP's representations of black masculinity held for her as a new member, she later criticized the organization for promoting a perception of women as objects of sexual desire whose place is defined as unalterably inferior to men's. Moreover, while still a member of the Communist Party, she did not hesitate to sign an internal document that was a critique of the Party's elitism and racial and sexual bias[26]. Although it was primarily membership in these institutions that resulted in Davis' necessity to defend her right to teach at the University of California, Los Angeles, she suspected that

[21] Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* 42.
[22] James 217.
[23] Mills 21.
[24] Mills 22.
[25] Davis, *An Autobiography* 309.
[26] James 7-9.

racial and sexist motives also led to the fact that many people "felt outraged that [she] had been allowed to teach the children of decent white Californians"[27].

A similarly devoted teacher and scholar, bell hooks embodied a distinctly intellectual view on activism as she chose scholarly work and university teaching as her vocation. It is important to note that she had an uncompromising idea of the way such teaching should be carried out so as to be classified as a form of activism. She claimed that it was already as a pupil in the segregated schools when she realized that "any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students was necessarily and fundamentally radical"[28] but she also admitted that talking with Davis about the death threats she often received before speaking "changed [hooks'] understanding of what it means to speak from a radical position"[29] because it meant that even the work of a lecturer might induce considerably violent responses. Importantly, being radical was merely one of the aspects of hooks' personality. It must be remembered that she was entering the academic sphere as a black person and, what was more, as a black woman. As her reflections confirmed, hooks was, similarly to Davis, also aware of the interconnection of racism and sexism.

Generally speaking, hooks was troubled that the work of intellectuals was rarely acknowledged as a form of activism important for revolutionary struggle. Such devaluation of intellectual pursuit made it difficult for individuals from marginalized groups, such as black communities, to see that pursuit as meaningful. In her own experience, "[being] too smart was synonymous with intellectuality and that was cause for concern, especially if one was female"[30]. While drawing on her youthful progress to intellectuality hooks realized that whereas both black male and female intellectuals confront racism, the politics of patriarchy makes women confront gender biases. What is more, sexism often works as a barrier to much needed male-peers' acknowledgement of women's intellectual effort[31], which makes black female academic pursuit even more challenging.

Aside from the focus on black female intellectual experience, there were aspects of hooks' feminist writing which echoed both Hamer's and Baker's activism. Firstly, in her willingness to get her message across hooks did not hesitate to make eye contact with the audience and speak about her personal experience in a simple language at the expense of being assumed

[27] Davis, *An Autobiography* 321.
[28] hooks, *Talking Back* 50.
[29] hooks, *Talking Back* 16-17.
[30] hooks, *Talking Back* 148-49.
[31] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 161.

anti-intellectual and unprofessional[32]. This could well be regarded as a similarity to Hamer's authentic speeches. Secondly, on a more theoretical level, hooks wrote:

> "To build a mass-based feminist movement, we need to have a liberatory ideology that can be shared with everyone. That revolutionary ideology can be created only if the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed, and incorporated. They must participate in [the] feminist movement as makers of theory and as leaders of action"[33].

Undoubtedly, hooks' interest in the feminist movement's reaching the masses of people resembles Baker's determination to create a southern mass movement within a context of the civil rights struggle. Interestingly, it proves that despite the different circumstances some parallels could be drawn among the four activists' careers. Further analysis illustrates that there were principles shared by them as a result of their distinct position as black women.

Such a significant principle was the women's belief in the value of the black community, in the importance of black people's loyalty towards each other, and in the necessity of black people holding together as any other marginalized group. This could generally be called a sense of community, which could be also defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together"[34]. In her theoretical writing, hooks supported the creation of the feminist mass movement because she knew that unless radical strategies were shared with a large audience she risked perpetuating the stereotype that she succeeded because she was different from the rest of her people, because she was an exception. Not only did she wish to be perceived as a member of the black community because she believed in black people's capacity, but she also discerned that perpetuation of seeing a successful black person as an exception enabled race and sex biases to remain intact[35]. Similarly, Davis' sense of community is also obvious in her scholarly work as she emphasized "the importance of building communities of struggle for economic, racial, and gender equality"[36] alongside her insistence that "[b]lack women scholars and

[32] hooks, *Talking Back* 77.
[33] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 161.
[34] D. W. McMillan and D. M. Chavis, "Sense of community: A definition and theory", *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Jan., 1986) 9.
[35] hooks, *Talking Back* 82.
[36] Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* 200.

professionals cannot afford to ignore the straits of our sisters who are acquainted with the immediacy of oppression in a way many of us are not"[37].

In contrast to theory, Baker and Hamer demonstrated their sense of community in their actions. Baker, despite the amount of organizing obligations, traveled overnight to comfort a woman who lost her only son. In listing reasons for her move she only came up with one- the woman "ought to have somebody to be concerned"[38]. Hamer exhibited a great deal of loyalty during her first voter-registration attempt when the bus driver, carrying the would-be voters to Indianola, was to be put to jail. The choice of the eighteen passengers to unite behind him made the white officer uneasy as he did not want to attract any civil rights attention. Hamer simply recalled: "We didn't know what it was all about, but we knowed we should stick with [the bus driver] because he carried us down there"[39]. Both instances show the women's awareness of the importance of offering help and compassion as well as of maintaining unity within the marginalized group.

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that in her comparative analyses of black and white feminist stances hooks was able to apply her sense of community as well as knowledge of specific values held by black people. She thus highlighted that black women could hardly be attracted to the emerging feminist movement for the reason of their longing for connection and a sense of shared purpose. In contrast with white women, they did not feel an absence of community in their lives despite exploitation and oppression. In addition, as she was often asked "whether being black is more important than being a woman; whether feminist struggle to end sexist oppression is more important than the struggle to end racism" hooks deduced that it was the fear of being regarded as subversive elements of the struggle against racism which made it difficult for black women to express their interest in feminist concerns[40].

Moreover, hooks observed that shared experience in the resistance struggle led black women to reject certain anti-male sentiments of the feminist movement[41]. This illustrates a definitely gender-defined component of the sense of community, which is embodied by black women. Opposing anti-male sentiments revealed a considerable level of loyalty that black women felt towards their male counterparts, which in the case of the female activists sometimes amounted to a kind of advocacy of the black men. In the case of the four discussed activists,

[37] Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 9.
[38] Grant 140.
[39] Lee 30.
[40] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 28-9.
[41] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 68-9.

this phenomenon is mostly connected with what Davis called "the most insidious myth about rape [which is] that it is most likely to be committed by a black man"[42]. A considerable body of articles and essays dealing with the issue of rape and sexual violence in general supports Davis' preoccupation with and interest in the refutation of the myth. As she repeatedly suggested:

> "[R]ape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society […] If we do not attempt to understand the nature of sexual violence as it relates racial, class, and governmental violence and power, we cannot even begin to develop strategies which will allow us to eventually purge our society of the oppressiveness of rape"[43].

Just as Davis stressed the necessity to understand rape within a socio-political context, hooks blamed patriarchal context and advocated:

> "Patriarchy forces fathers to act as monsters, encourages husbands and lovers to be rapists in disguise; it teaches our blood brothers to feel ashamed that they care for us, and denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives"[44].

As if she had been aware of Davis' theory that "rape and the racist use of fraudulent rape charge are historically inseparable"[45], Hamer was extremely worried about the white female volunteers' presence in her southern hometown and its consequences for black men. She knew that "[if] some whites laid hands on one of those young girls, every Negro in Ruleville would be in trouble", which, according to Lee, reflected her realistic understanding of who was most endangered by interracial liaisons[46]. Lastly, although the fight for racial equality was considerably neglected by the NAACP during the Second World War, this was not true for Baker. She continued to tend to black people's needs as she was able to foresee the role that racism played within the war context. As Grant confirms: "She fought for the rights of black servicemen and battled for their rights when they were charged- often falsely- with rape, murder, and other crimes"[47].

In conclusion, their sense of community and loyalty towards black men could be considered as a unifying feature of black female activism demonstrated by the four black women. It is important to bear in mind that black men did not always offer the same loyalty and support to

[42] James 142.
[43] James 142-5.
[44] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981) 114.
[45] James 143.
[46] Lee 75.
[47] Grant 56.

black women of the community. Accordingly, the next chapter is going to focus on the similarities of the women's experience with unsupportive and oppressive black male counterparts as well as those of white supremacy.

Chapter 4: Identifying sexism- the black women's multilayered oppression

As this chapter is going to illustrate, there were various means of oppression that the four activists were forced to cope with not only because of their race but more importantly also because of their gender. In other words, their experience with the combination of racist assaults and sexist humiliation will be introduced. Interestingly, such complex assaults were not coming exclusively from white supremacy but the women also encountered sexist discrimination coming from black men. Thus the four activists were actually oppressed because of their willingness to take the active role in the anti-racist struggle. Moreover, the chapter is going to focus on academic discourse and media in general and their role in the black women's oppression, which included ignorance of black women's experience on the one hand and its misleading description on the other. Consequently, the concept of black women's oppression as a multi-dimensional phenomenon requiring a specific kind of struggle will be introduced. Lastly, the focus on sexist oppression serves as a link to a comparison of how the four women actually reacted in their activism to the assaults they experienced, which is going to show a crucial difference between the older generation, represented by Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, and the younger generation of Angela Davis and bell hooks.

To begin with, it has been mentioned that in their challenging of white supremacy and especially white men, the black female activists often encountered assaults specifically aimed at them because of their sex. Whereas some means of oppression were still purely racist and thus applicable to the whole black community, white men also incorporated sexist abuse into their oppression of black women which thus gained a specific character. It is probably in Hamer's experience where the most illustrative example of sexist assault can be found, although in her own recollections of her infamous beating in Winona she was only gradually acknowledging the sexist elements of the incident. When Hamer and the group of civil rights workers were arrested while traveling to conduct teacher-training classes for voter registration, they could not have anticipated the brutality awaiting them in jail. Not only were the workers individually beaten by the white officers but those white men even forced two young black male prisoners to participate in the beating of the black female workers, which necessarily made the attack even more vicious[1].

Firstly, the brutal beating must have been an extraordinarily painful experience, which all the workers alluded to in their subsequent speeches. More specifically, in Hamer's case the

[1] Lee 45-51.

incident undeniably had a devastating and lasting effect on her physical health as "[she] was blinded in her left eye, and her kidneys were permanently damaged"[2]. Secondly, sexual elements of her attack are difficult to ignore. Interestingly, despite her repeated references to the atrocities of the beating it was nine years after the incident when Hamer revealed that a white man was also pulling her dress over her head in order to feel under her clothes[3]. According to one of her biographers, Hamer readily acknowledged that the incident involved racial control, but only in private she pondered the degree to which her attackers might have experienced some degree of sexual gratification from the beatings[4]. She might have preferred to expunge it from her memory or to protect her reputation but the actual reasons for her reluctance publicly to discuss the sexual undertones of the brutal attack can only be speculated about.

Importantly, the focus should not remain limited to the white man vs. black woman sphere. As was foreshadowed in the previous chapter, the black women's loyalty towards their male counterparts did not always elicit a positive response, particularly from black leaders. Accordingly, the four women activists were repeatedly confronted with the male leaders' contempt within the civil rights organizations. For instance, Baker sustained the SCLC ministers' slights only because she "felt that the promise of a movement was worth sacrifice of her pride"[5]. Interestingly, it was SCLC's leading figure and spokesperson, Martin Luther King, with whom Baker had considerable clashes concerning her role as a woman within the organization's structure. When SCLC desperately sought someone who would set up an office and keep the organization on task, King had to be persuaded that Baker could be effective in the administrator's role as he, according to Moye, seemed "to have considered the term *professional woman* an oxymoron"[6]. Although she was eventually promoted to the position of the SCLC's executive director, her official title was *acting* executive director and pragmatic Baker well knew that having a woman in charge of the organization would have been too much for the ministerial and masculine ego. Notably, Baker was well aware of the fact that there would hardly be a role for her in a leadership capacity within SCLC simply because she was a woman and she was not a minister. Lastly, despite her respect of King, she was not willing to subscribe to everything that came out of the leader's mouth[7].

[2] Lee 53.
[3] Lee 52.
[4] Lee 59.
[5] Grant 104.
[6] Moye 94 .
[7] Moye 100-5.

When analyzing the reasons for her failure to establish a more collegial relationship with King, Baker mentioned the minister's middle-class background as a reason why King was not provided with any personal sense of struggle and that she therefore saw him as a person who did not fight his own way up. She claimed that because he was provided with advantages of his upbringing he "could not accept the concepts of sharing and of developing the skills of others that she valued"[8]. This justification of their clash illustrates Baker's comparatively mild attitude towards the SCLC ministers' sexism. Whereas other women within the organization argued that "[those] men didn't have any faith in women", Baker's main complaint about "the organization was its dependence on King's charismatic leadership […] not rampant male chauvinism"[9]. Still, her experience can support Davis' belief about black men that "[a] victim of racism can also be a perpetrator of sexism"[10].

It was during her affiliation with all-black organizations that Davis arrived at such a belief. As a member of BPP she encountered what was to become a constant problem in her political life - being heavily criticized for doing a man's job because of the generally shared belief that women should not play leadership roles. Davis then commented:

> "I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists - namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness. […] These men [viewed] Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood - especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right"[11].

Therefore, it should not be maintained that Davis was simply fighting against racism. In confronting the black leaders' prejudices, she and other black women were making "important contributions to the effort to elevate people's consciousness about the impact of sexism [because they] were in fact fighting for [their] right to make equal contributions to the fight against racism"[12]. That specific struggle of black female activists entailed confronting sexism both within the movement and embedded in literature and academic discourse about black women.

There were various means how media could do harm to black women activists. Firstly, the black women's contributions were often simply omitted from the accounts of the civil rights

[8] Grant 123.
[9] Moye 98.
[10] Davis, *Meaning of Freedom* 31.
[11] Davis, *An Autobiography* 161.
[12] James 16.

struggle. This was called "a messiah complex" by Davis as she explained: "[When] we think of the civil rights movement, we think of Martin Luther King. We can't imagine that the movement could have been created by huge numbers of people whose names we do not even know"[13]. As far as the accounts of the feminist movement are concerned, hooks complained that "[s]exism and racism have so informed the perspective of American historiographers that they have tended to overlook and exclude the effort of black women in discussions of the American women's rights movement"[14].

Significantly, when hooks decided to make up for the lack of writing by black feminist intellectuals by producing a book of her own, the progress was complicated. After it was rejected by a number of publishers, hooks' first publication, *Ain't I A Woman*, was finally published but a sharp critique of the author's uncompromising opinions followed. In her reflection on those times, hooks admitted: "While I had expected a climate of critical dialogue, I was not expecting a critical avalanche that had the power in its intensity to crush the spirit"[15]. Generally speaking, it is then obvious that the black feminists' efforts to have their work acknowledged by the white supremacy were accompanied by hardships. It is worth observing that those hardships gradually came to be written about by white female academics such as Felicity A. Nussbaum, a specialist in gender studies. Already in 1990s, Nussbaum named Davis' *Women, Race & Class* and hooks' *Ain't I A Woman* among what she called "revisionary texts [that] in spite of significant theoretical content […] were simply disregarded by those who have composed the history of Anglo-American feminism. The effect was to postpone (white) feminism's confrontation with its blindness"[16]. Such perspective could be seen as a signal of long-awaited acknowledgment of black feminists' contributions.

Secondly, when black women were not omitted in literature and media, they were often represented in a distorted manner. Both Davis and hooks were concerned with this phenomenon because they knew that such misleading representations perpetuate various myths concerning black women. In her rape analysis, Davis clearly demonstrated this perpetuation by stressing that white men's sexual assaults on black women were "ideologically sanctioned by politicians, scholars and journalists, and by literary artists who

[13] Davis, *Meaning of Freedom* 150.
[14] hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 160.
[15] hooks, *Talking Back* 8.
[16] Felicity A. Nussbaum, "(White) Anglo-American Feminism in Non-US/ Non-us Space", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Autumn, 1993): 265, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463928 >, 26 Feb. 2015.

often portrayed Black women as promiscuous and immoral"[17]. Together with her interest in the refutation of the myth of the black rapist it could be suggested that Davis was aware that myths were "designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women"[18]. In addition, hooks focused on the "mammy" stereotype as a kind of counterpart of black women's mass-media representations as sexual savages and/or prostitutes. In her refuting the stereotype, she warned that "racist and sexist assumptions that Black women are somehow 'innately' more capable of caring for others continues to permeate cultural thinking about Black female roles"[19].

Interestingly, hooks' and Davis' focus on myths and stereotypes meant more than just criticizing them and struggling to refute those false assumptions about black women. Both activists showed a capacity to take significant advantage of the myths once they needed to illustrate their role as tools of oppression. Firstly, during her trial, Davis easily discerned sexist stereotypes in the prosecutor's opening speech and readily attacked them in her defense statement. Once she calmly refused the possibility that she would commit crimes of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy having been motivated by pure passion, Davis continued further:

> "Members of the jury, this is utterly fantastic. […] Yet it is understandable that [the prosecutor] would like to take advantage of the fact that I am a woman, for in this society women are supposed to act only in accordance with dictates of their emotions and passions. I might say that this is clearly a symptom of the male chauvinism which prevails in our society"[20].

By demonstrating the widespread usage of the myth applied against her as an individual, Davis skillfully reminded female members of the jury of their experiences of similar kind and thus arguably gained their understanding and sympathy. Secondly, hooks used her knowledge of myths to attack white feminists' hypocrisy as she understood the functioning of the racist stereotype of the strong and superhuman black woman. On the one hand, hooks warned that the stereotype worked as an operative myth in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized and the role white women may play in the maintenance of that victimization. On the other hand, she also realized that by projecting onto black women a mythical power and strength, white women promoted a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims[21]. Moreover, this myth of

[17] Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 176.
[18] James 155.
[19] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 154.
[20] Davis, *An Autobiography* 363.
[21] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 13-14.

a strong black woman unfavorably undermined what both hooks and Davis intended to prove in their feminist-oriented activism - that the character of black women's oppression in the American context is unique in consisting of multiple interconnected elements and, as hooks asserted: "Within the sex/ race/ class hierarchies of the United States, Black women have always resided at the bottom"[22].

Davis almost seemed to paraphrase hooks' words as she argued that not only is the black woman most severely encumbered by the male supremacist structures of American society but also that this encumbrance combines with class exploitation and national oppression[23]. In other words, the oppression the black woman has to cope with should be understood as multilayered; it is actually a combination of racism, sexism, and classism. Having once established that, it is understandable that Davis saw white feminists' folly as she claimed:

> "Their theories and practice have frequently implied that the purest and most direct challenge to sexism is one exorcised of elements related to racial and economic oppression - as if there were such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and fighting back in an abstract historical context"[24].

Fortunately, the awareness of the interconnection of sexism with other forms of oppression gradually ceased to be ignored by white feminists, which can be demonstrated by Judith Butler and her influential book, *Gender Trouble*, where she acknowledges: "If one 'is' a woman, that is sure not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive […] because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities"[25].

Furthermore, hooks' awareness of the multilayered oppression of black women led her eloquently to criticize white feminist movement in a defiant manner which has accompanied her throughout her activist career. Just as Davis highlighted the exciting possibilities of women of color research and organizing strategies that are compelled to address complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality[26], hooks similarly maintained that black women must continue to insist on their "right to participate in shaping feminist theory and

[22] hooks and West, *Breaking Bread* 154.
[23] James 186.
[24] Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* 18.
[25] Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/ Gender/ Desire", *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London: Routledge, 1999) 6.
[26] James 313.

practice that addresses racial concerns as well as our feminist issues"[27]. Knowing hooks' willingness to challenge white feminists' ignorance, it is satisfactory to realize that Ann Pellegrini ranked bell hooks among feminists of color who have played leading roles in the development of theory in the academy and out. Moreover, Pellegrini also placed hooks within the context of "important and identifiable traditions of feminist scholarship in which gender is not and has never been the privileged object of analysis apart from […] race or class or sexuality"[28].

Consequently, as both Davis and hooks promoted the perception of black women's exploitation as a multilayered phenomenon, they also firmly expressed their belief that the multi-faceted oppression unavoidably requires a multi-faceted struggle. Firstly, this could be confirmed by Becky Thompson who appreciated - from her perspective of a white feminist activist - that already by the late 1970s "Angela Davis was […] linking anti-capitalist struggle with the fight against race and gender oppression"[29]. Secondly, although hooks defined feminism "as a movement to end sexist oppression"[30] it was in the feminist movement where she saw the potential for the multilayered struggle. Accordingly, she added: "Since all forms of oppression are linked in our society […] one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact. Challenging sexist oppression is a crucial step in the struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression"[31].

In addition, hooks as well as Davis embodied considerably radical ideas about the nature of the multilayered struggle. In their perspective, ending sexist oppression should involve an irretrievable transformation of the whole social order. That perspective seemed to correspond with the 1990s view of Patricia Yancey Martin, a white activist and gender studies scholar, who asserted that "[f]eminism is transformational because it involves a vision of society that does not exist and sees social, political, and economic change as necessary for that vision to be realized"[32]. Once again, the gradual agreement in white and black feminists' opinions can be observed. It could still be argued that both Davis and hooks, from their feminist

[27] hooks, *Talking Back* 182.
[28] Ann Pellegrini, "Women on Top, Boys on the Side, but Some of Us Are Brave: Blackness, Lesbianism, and the Visible", *College Literature*, Vol. 24,No. 1 (Feb., 1997): 85, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25099628> 26 Feb. 2015.
[29] Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer, 2002): 341, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178747>, 26 Feb. 2015.
[30] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 31.
[31] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 35-36.
[32] Patricia Yancey Martin, "Rethinking Feminist Organizations", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (June, 1990): 184, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189611>, 27 Feb. 2015.

perspective of women of color, were actually calling for a revolution. As Davis resolutely stated:

> "[The] ideology of female inferiority must be so thoroughly subverted that once the revolution is achieved, it will be impossible to refer with impunity to 'my better half' or to be the 'natural' place of the woman as in the home"[33].

The revolutionary stance in hooks' theory can be discerned in one of her amendments to her definition of feminism. Not only did she highlight the movement's mission to end sexist oppression but she also added that the feminist movement can only be successful if people are committed to revolution and to the establishment of a new social order[34]. Having demonstrated hooks' and Davis' interest in the various forms of oppression of black women and the specific situation of black women within the context of the American white supremacy as well as black community, their distinct feminist orientation need not be questioned. However, the search for similarly oriented sentiments among the other two activists of the thesis' focus, Baker and Hamer, is going to demonstrate a crucial difference between the two generations of the women in question.

Although Hamer tried to caution white feminists that black women would never join their organization unless they understood the particular depth of black women's concerns, which might resemble Davis' and hooks' agenda, her association with white feminists was a pragmatic one. Whereas mainstream feminists needed legitimacy through association with a black female icon, Hamer went seeking financial support and state exposure for one of her campaigns[35]. It is important to be aware of the fact that Hamer's views on relations between the sexes were inconsistent with those of women in the emerging feminist movement. She obviously did not question that taking action and decision-making were preserved for men whereas women's role was to strengthen the men. Moreover, Hamer also dismissed the idea of liberating herself from the black man as she stated:

> "I'm not going to try that thing. I got a black husband, six feet three, 240 pounds, with a 14 shoe, that I don't *want* to be liberated from. But we are here to work side by side with this black man in trying to bring liberation to all people"[36].

[33] James 186.
[34] hooks, *Feminist Theory* 159.
[35] Lee 170.
[36] Mills 274.

Therefore, it can be deduced that Hamer did not regard herself as a feminist and that she always took the black people's liberation as foremost, without distinguishing between male and female experience. Similarly, Baker claimed: "I have never been one to feel great needs in the direction of setting myself apart as a woman. I've always thought first and foremost of people as individuals"[37]. Despite being a married woman, she maintained her name as Baker but denied that the act was a concrete proof of her feminism as she explained: "I never considered myself a feminist in the sense of championing the rights of women, but I may have felt the need to exercise this right by retaining my name"[38].

One could then straightforwardly conclude that Baker and Hamer did not identify themselves as feminists and because of that they should be perceived as having nothing to do with feminism as such. Nevertheless, this would be too simplistic as some considerably feminist epithets were retrospectively applied to both activists. Firstly, Barbara Ransby emphasizes that while Baker's most public associations were with men, some of her most sustaining relationships were with other women activists and via their female bonding those women were laying the foundation for the black feminists of future generations even before the term 'feminist' was invented[39]. Furthermore, Moye also argues that Baker's defiant stance and actions made her an effective feminist ahead of her time and also adds that "American feminists […] claim Baker as a patron saint of the modern women's movement because she refused to conform to society's expectations of how she should behave"[40]. Secondly, in a similar manner Hamer was retrospectively classified as "a 'nonfeminist' whose life and powerful presence had undeniably feminist consequences"[41], as was the case of many other black women of her generation. The fact is that both Hamer and Baker, despite their unwillingness to be perceived as advocates of feminism, served as models for future feminists, which demonstrates the immense influence their activism had on other women.

Nevertheless, with respect to the way that the four activists referred to themselves a significant difference reveals itself between the two generations. Whereas Baker and Hamer, the representatives of the older generation, did not feel the need to contrast their specific position as black women with that of men, Davis and hooks worked with that contrast as they were preoccupied with analyses of all the aspects of the black women's position. The

[37] Grant 227.
[38] Grant 40.
[39] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 4.
[40] Moye 107.
[41] Lee 172.

important fact is that the historical context of the four women's activism was different as their perspectives were shaped by the civil rights movement and its climax of the 1960s in Baker's and Hamer's case and by the subsequent decades in the case of Davis and hooks. Interestingly, hooks' theoretical work acknowledged the specific context of the civil rights era and its consequence on female activists' focus. In her opinion, the reasons for the fact that in the forty years from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s black female leaders ceased to advocate women's rights could be explained accordingly:

> "Those black women who believed in social equality of the sexes learned to suppress their opinions for fear attention might be shifted from racial issues. They believed that they should first support the freedom for black people, then later, when that freedom was obtained, work for women's rights. Unfortunately, they did not foresee the strength of black male resistance to the idea that women should have equal status with men"[42].

This seems not only to correspond with Hamer's and Baker's focus on black people as individuals but also with their already mentioned unquestionable support of black men. Similarly to other black female activists of the era, Baker's and Hamer's "race loyalty undoubtedly overshadowed gender issues in [their] minds"[43]. Davis offered an additional explanation of the lack of feminist interest among civil rights female activists as she believed that racism at the beginning of the twenty-first century was "more deeply inflected by class, gender, and sexuality than we may have recognized it to be at the middle of the twentieth century"[44], that is, at the civil rights movement's climax. Thus the civil rights era could arguably be seen as an unsuitable environment for feminist concerns.

In conclusion, despite the importance of respecting the difference in the context of women's activism, Rosalee A. Clawson and John A. Clark introduce two important things that the civil rights movement and the women's movement had in common - the first was the interest in equal rights whereas the second common feature was the fact that both movements too often made the rights of black women invisible[45]. This supports the assumption that there might have been considerable similarities among Baker's, Hamer's, Davis', and hooks'

[42] hooks, *Aint I a Woman* 176-7.
[43] Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "Black Women and Black Power: The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee", *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements*, ed. Collier-Thomas Betty and V. P. Franklin (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 207.
[44] Davis, *Meaning of Freedom* 168.
[45] Rosalee A. Clawson and John A. Clark, "The Attitudinal Structure of African American Women Party Activists: The Impact of Race, Gender, and Religion", *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (June, 2003): 213, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3219899 >, 28 Feb. 2015.

involvements in those movements. Furthermore, the thesis listed a large number of similarities of their specific black female experience which involves an important fact that, aside from confronting racism, all four women were dealing with sexism in one way or another. Therefore, although the differences in the four women's attitudes to feminism might be considered interesting and worthy of observation, the women's unique contribution to black activism within the United States should be considered foremost.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The thesis has explored the activist career of four black women. Within the context of the United States of America, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and bell hooks have been discussed in terms of their progress to anti-racist and/or feminist activism and their respective areas of interest. It has already been highlighted that the women were chosen roughly to represent two distinct periods- the climax of the civil rights movement and the following decades that could be associated with the rise of feminism in the United States. In the thesis, this choice has had two main purposes. Firstly, on a concrete level, the third chapter has aimed to demonstrate a considerable difference in the attitudes to feminism between Baker and Hamer on the one hand and Davis and hooks on the other. Baker's and Hamer's reluctance to identify with feminist thought can thus promote a retrospective understanding of the civil rights movement as an environment where it was unsuitable and basically too soon to draw attention to feminist concerns. Notably, the thesis has also emphasized the fact that Baker, Hamer, and many other black women active in the civil rights influenced future generations of black feminists and activists and that they also significantly contributed to the anti-racist resistance struggle.

Therefore, one of the goals of the thesis has been to remind its readers of the important role that black women played in the civil rights movement and of the extent to which they figured in the anti-racist struggle, as it is quite recently that the black women's value for the movement has been recognized. Such a recent recognition could be offered by Clawson and Clark who acknowledge that without the efforts of Baker, Hamer, "and those of countless other women, the movement would not have achieved the results that it did"[1]. More specifically, one of Hamer's biographers asserts: "Black women afforded the civil rights movement a style of leadership that contributed greatly to its success, and it was the destitute sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer who rose up and gave this style of leadership its broadest appeal"[2]. Furthermore, Ella Baker's long-lasting influence could not be questioned as Moye summarizes her legacy:

> "She developed a sophisticated philosophy of civil rights activism that she described memorably as 'group-centered leadership', which remade the black

[1] Clawson and Clark 212.
[2] Lee xii.

> freedom movement in the 1960s and continues to inform activists for social justice and equality in the twenty-first century"[3].

In addition to that, the thesis has also intended to appreciate the black women's contributions to feminist theory and more generally to the development of the feminist movement as such. In this sense, Davis definitely deserves to be recognized as the author of some of "the earliest essays on antiracist feminist theory contextualized in the black experience in the Americas"[4]. Moreover, in one of the many publications by which she enriched the feminist theory, hooks specified that "[no] intervention changed the face of American feminism more than the demand that feminist thinkers acknowledge the reality of race and racism"[5]. Such a demand is observable in both hooks' and Davis' feminist careers because a challenging of the white feminists was an inextricable component of their activism.

The correct evaluation of the four women's achievements is strongly connected with the second and probably more significant purpose of the thesis. On a more general level, the thesis has aimed to present an accurate picture of black female activism in the second half of the twentieth century, which is a period of time that roughly comprises the careers of the four women in question. In order to do so, it has been necessary to illustrate the position of the black female activists within the American social hierarchy. Consequently, the thesis has introduced the concept of black female oppression as a multilayered phenomenon. This complex oppression was experienced by all of the four women and its multiple layers could be metaphorically described as individual rungs of a ladder. Firstly, as has been demonstrated in the first chapter, it was already in childhood and youth when Baker, Hamer, Davis, and hooks became aware of what it means to grow up as black people within the white supremacist society in the United States. In other words, they then realized the presence of racism in their lives. Secondly, as they were growing older, the four activists-to-be gradually became aware of their situation as black women. As a result of various expressions of sexist oppression stemming from the white supremacy they found themselves in situations that were exclusively reserved for them on the basis of their gender and that the black men would have never experienced. Still, such an amount of oppression was not enough.

Thirdly, the four discussed women decided to be active, to assume leadership positions, and to become involved in the resistance struggle alongside their men. That decision even aggravated their condition as their intention to adopt an active role was met with strongly

[3] Moye 2.
[4] James 13.
[5] bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000) 55.

disapproving responses from black men. These responses often resulted in discrimination that could well be classified as sexist. In addition, when Davis and hooks sought to become involved in the emerging feminist movement, their concerns were not taken seriously by the white women. To summarize these layers of oppression, it could be stated that the black women had to cope with the exploitation coming not only from white supremacy, both men and women, but also from black men. This condition then left them with no 'institutionalized other' whom they could hypothetically have oppressed. Accordingly, their situation must be acknowledged as unique and so should be their activism. Aside from the characteristic aspects of each woman's career that have been dealt with in the second chapter, the uniqueness of their activism lies in the fact that it offers the perspective of one of the most oppressed social group within the American context. Therefore, although the male perspective has been the one that traditionally shaped the public consciousness, views of black women should definitely be understood as beneficial and enriching.

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