BLOODY SUNDAY, WOMEN

AND THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

By Lisa Marostica

One of the most significant events in the history of the civil rights movement is the first Selma to Montgomery march that took place on March 7, 1965 and ended on Edmund Pettus Bridge, just outside Selma on Highway 80. On the bridge that today is called the "bridge of freedom" local police on horseback stopped the marchers beating them with billy clubs in a cloud of tear gas.

The event went down in history as Bloody Sunday and it is considered a turning point in the long African American struggle for civil rights. In fact the violence and the brutality of the Alabama troopers that attacked defenseless women and girls drew the media attention and on Sunday night shocking images were broadcasted on TV. Those images generated the widespread support necessary for the passage of the civil rights legislation and as a result that same year, in August, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

Women can be considered the protagonists of this event. As a matter of fact they played a key role and historical images show that women and girls were everywhere during the most dramatic events of the civil rights movement. But history has often overlooked them. The purpose of this essay is precisely to stress the importance of memorializing those women who dedicated their lives to the struggle for human and civil rights.

As far as the historical background is concerned it is highly necessary to get the picture of those years to understand how these women were instrumental in the success of the Civil Rights Movement, therefore let's start having a look at the events of that period of time.

Selma was a place where even after the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and despite Amendment 15 of the American Constitution[1], African Americans citizens continued to see their voting rights violated and people lived in fear.

"In certain points of Alabama during those years, especially in the Black Belt and in Dallas County, it was just almost uncontrollable fear. You knew if you went to Selma, some of the surrounding areas and towns and community, it was like putting your life on the line. It was very risky. People had some real reservations about getting involved in places like Selma."[2]

Selma had a population that was 85 percent black and only 1 per cent was registered as voters. As in many States of the South of the U.S., also in this town African Americans couldn't exercise their constitutional right to vote as white citizens did because of the numerous barriers they encountered, namely they had to pay a poll tax and to pass a literacy test to be registered, a test which was constantly changed: "Between August 1964 and July 1965 the State of Alabama used one hundred different literacy tests to make it difficult for people to "study" for the test."[3]

Moreover, in many cities, the registrar's office opened only twice a month and people had to wait long hours in queue before entering the courthouse. Only a few managed to be registered while the others stood there running the risk of being beaten or arrested by the police, as happened to Amelia Boynton Robinson, who was arrested in January 1965, and to Annie Lee Cooper. Mrs. Cooper is one of the women who had enough courage to defy the authority because she was tired of the police harassment. Sheriff Clark insulted her and she stuck him, but consequently she was beaten while the Sheriff's attorneys held her down on the floor.

In the 1950s and 1960s organizations for human and civil rights, such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

[1] Amendment 15 of the American Constitution was ratified on February 2, 1870 and it stated: *"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude"*

[2] National Park Service U.S. department of the interior, Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans, "*The Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March: shaking the conscience of the Nation*", http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/133SEMO/133facts2.htm

[3] National Park Service U.S. department of the interior, Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans, "The Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March: shaking the conscience of the Nation, http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/133SEMO/133facts1.htm

and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized mass demonstrations and non-violent acts of civil disobedience. Black people were tired of being treated like slaves and they wanted to end racial segregation in voting. They knew the importance of the right to vote, because as a leader of the movement, Hosea Williams, said in one of his speeches "If you can't vote, then you are not free; and if you ain't free, children, then you're a slave"[4]. This statement was highly effective on the children who were listening to him, because Sheyann Webb remembers those words even today.

The event that led to Bloody Sunday was the murder of a young man, Jimmy Lee Jackson, during a nighttime march in Marion, near Selma. Violence erupted during the march and he was shot by an Alabama trooper while trying to protect his mother.

As a response to Jimmy Lee Jackson death a group of young people in Selma, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) together with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the association led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., proposed a symbolic march that would start in Selma and travel 54 miles to Montgomery. After two aborted marches, the first on March 7 and the second on March 9, which was called "Turnaround Tuesday"[5], the final and successful march started on March 21 and ended five days later in Montgomery.

But the turning point, as is generally recognized, was Bloody Sunday. "[…] Something about that day in Selma touched a nerve deeper than anything that had come before. […] People just couldn't believe this was happening, not in America."[6] This statement by John Lewis highlights the importance of what happened on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day. Millions of people all over the United States were watching television on Sunday night when their programs were interrupted with shocking images of nonviolent marchers being beaten up.

[4] Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days as told to Frank Sikora,* Alabama The University of Alabama press Tuscaloosa, 1970.

[5] Martin Luther King led the marchers out to the Edmund Pettus Bridge to pray and then turned back to the church because Governor Wallace had banned all kinds of demonstrations.

[6] John Lewis and Michael d'Orso, "Bloody Sunday" in *Walking with the wind: A Memoir of the Movement.* New York, 1998.

"ABC interrupted its broadcast of the movie *Judgment at Nuremberg* to show the violence, suggesting to many a parallel between the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany and the treatment of blacks in the south. Most viewers had never heard of Selma, but after March 7, they would never forget it."[7]

Images are more powerful than words, and pictures like these ones of Amelia Boynton Robinson, who was at the center of civil rights activity at the time, shook the general conscience and helped to spark the outpouring of support for the civil rights movement.

This woman, known as "the woman on the front" has been recognized as a pivotal figure in the struggle for the civil rights of Black Americans. She was born in 1911 in Georgia and her commitment to human and civil rights started in the 1930s with her husband, Samuel Boynton who was the President of the Dallas County Voter League. Together with her friend Marie Foster she held classes to help African Americans pass the literary test required for the registration. In the Sixties, after her husband death, her home became the center of the civil rights battles as it was used for the meetings to organize demonstrations. In 1964 she was the first woman to seek a seat in the Congress and she obtained ten percent of votes[8]. With the purpose of understanding the great contribution this woman gave to the cause, I would like to report two events.

In January 1965 she was arrested by Sheriff Jim Clark while she was in the line outside of the courthouse. The book *Selma, Lord, Selma* recollects the memories of Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, two women that in 1965, at the age of 8, took part into the marches on Selma. One of them, Sheyann Webb, remembers what happened with these words: "Then the incident with Mrs. Boynton took place. Later I learned that she

[7] National Park Service U.S. department of the interior, Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans, "The Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March: shaking the conscience of the Nation, http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/133semo/133selma.htm

[8] National Visionary Leadership Project, Amelia Boynton Robinson, biography. http://www.visionaryproject.com/robinsonameliaboynton/

had asked him if she could go into the courthouse, and he said she could, but added, "You stay inside once you get there". Well, it was the lunch hour and all the courthouse workers left so Mrs. Boynton came out and when the sheriff saw her, he just got mad. He ran her down the street to a sheriff's car and had her arrested and taken away to the city jail"[9]. In response one hundred and five local teachers marched to the courthouse asking for her to be released and this was the first black

middle class demonstration in Selma. Indeed it had a great influence because as Rev. Frederik D. Reese told in an interview "Everybody marched after the teachers because teachers had more influence than they ever dreamed in the community."[10]

On Bloody Sunday Amelia Boynton Robinson was on the bridge and she was gassed, beaten and left for dead as the pictures showed to the world. Mrs. Robinson in an interview about her experience remembers: "So that Sunday morning I went immediately to the church. I had on high-heel shoes, because at that time I didn't wear low-heel shoes. I started out with the rest. Marie Foster and I were in the front. And just before we got to the light across the [Edmund Pettus] bridge, we saw that the road was blocked. I didn't think anything was going to happen, but as we approached, it was announced, "Don't go any farther." And when Hosea Williams said, "May I say something?" Clark said, "No, you may not say anything. Charge on them, men!" And they started beating us. They had horses. And I saw them when they were beating people down, and I just stood. Then one guy hit me with the nightstick, I think it was a nightstick. He hit me with the nightstick just back of the head and down toward the shoulder. And I still stood up there. Then the second lick was at the base of the neck. And I fell. I think that was the ambulance that came from Anderson Funeral Home that took me to the church and tried to revive me but could not revive me. So they took me to the Good Samaritan Hospital. And when I was revived, I really didn't know where I was, but I was there several hours before I really came to."[11]

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[9] Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days as told to Frank Sikora,* Alabama The University of Alabama press Tuscaloosa, 1970 p. 26

[10] Callie Crossley, James A. DeVinney, Transcript of "Bridge to freedom (1965) in *Eyes on the prize* ,TV series documentary 1987.

[11] National Park Service U.S. department of the interior, Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans, "The Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March: shaking the conscience of the Nation, http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/133semo/133selma.htm

The same event is reported in the book *Selma, Lord, Selma* through the words of Rachel West Nelson: "I had never faced the troopers before, and nobody had ever put on gas masks during the downtown marches. But this one was different; we were out of the city limits and on a highway. Williams said something to the troopers asking if we could pray – I didn't hear it but was told later he asked if we could- and then I heard the voice again come over the bullhorn and tell us we had two minutes to disperse. […] So the next thing I know – it didn't seem like two minutes had gone by – the voice was saying, "Troopers advance and see that they are dispersed". Just all of a sudden it was beginning to happen. I couldn't see for sure how it began, but just before it did I took another look and saw the line of troopers moving toward us."[12]

These two witnesses experienced dread, fear, and astonishment when the police attacked the group of marchers as they didn't expect such a violent reaction. The troopers had gas masks and clubs because they had planned previously to beat and gas the negroes, as if there were no other means to stop the march. They wanted not only to discourage the activists from organizing further marches or demonstrations, but also to force them to give up the cause. According to governor Wallace that day had to sign the defeat of the movement, but the reaction of the police had the opposite effect and, in the end, it was a victory for the movement.

A further evidence of the effectiveness of Bloody Sunday is to be found in the fact that President Johnson, eight days after that event, asked for a comprehensive Voting Rights Bill and he astonished the nation using the words of the movement: "What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."[13] *We shall overcome* was the song of the movement and its lyrics was full of hope and it gave the protesters the courage and the certainty that their

[12] Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days as told to Frank Sikora,* , Alabama The University of Alabama press Tuscaloosa, 1970.

[13] National Park Service U.S. department of the interior, Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans, "The Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March: shaking the conscience of the Nation, http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/133semo/133selma.htm

efforts would not be vain. Martin Luther King, Jr. listening to these words said with a drop in his eyes that it was a victory like no one other.

As regard the role played by the media coverage, the brutal assault on nonviolent marchers, including women and girls, was filmed by journalists, pictures were taken of the violence and the fights on the bridge and the following day the newspapers reported the incident. Thanks to the media, public opinion was shaped and the general public condemned what happened in Selma. Consequently people arrived from all the nation to join the protest in Selma and according to Rev. Frederick Reese they said: "We are here to share with the people of Selma in this struggle for the right to vote. We have seen on television screen the violence that took place and we're here to share with you."[14] Sheyann Webb remembered: "Nothing like this had ever happened before in America; people from all over had come to join us because we were successful in dramatizing that there were wrongs in the South and the time had come to change them. It was more than the right to vote; it was also the way we had been treated"[15]. As a matter of fact, on March 7 about 600 people gathered to march, on "Turnaround Tuesday" they were between 2,000 and 2,500 and on March 25 about 25,000 people reached Montgomery. And Viola Liuzzo was one of them.

She is another woman who, like Amelia Boynton Robinson is linked to Bloody Sunday, even if in a different way: while Amelia Boynton Robinson organized and took part into the march on March 7, Viola Liuzzo joined the protest in Selma because of what happened on Bloody Sunday. But these two women, one black and the other white, had in common the courage, the determination and the desire to stop injustices. Both of them sacrificed their lives for the cause.

Viola Liuzzo was a thirty-nine-year-old white housewife from Michigan who was shot by Ku Klux Klan members while she was driving back to Selma after participating in the five-day march to Montgomery.

Her personal experience led her to fight against racism and segregation. She was born in California in 1925 and after her family sank into poverty she moved from town to town

[14] Callie Crossley, James A. DeVinney, Transcript of "Bridge to freedom (1965) in *Eyes on the prize* ,TV series documentary 1987.

[15] Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days as told to Frank Sikora,* , Alabama The University of Alabama press Tuscaloosa, 1970. P.123.

through Tennessee and Georgia and she saw first-hand the degradation of racism. Liuzzo during the wartime worked in a cafeteria, married and had five children and became close friend with Sarah Evans, an African American woman with whom she joined the National Association for Advancement of Colored People[16]. Viola Liuzzo and her ideas were taken as an example by the women's movements of the Seventies. According to Sarah Evans, Viola Liuzzo lived a life that combined the care of the family and the home with a concern for the world around her. She resisted her oppression as a woman as well. When she went back to school as a high-school dropout, working class housewife, she wrote: "I protest the attitude of the great majority of men who hold to the conviction that any married woman who is unable to find contentment and self-satisfaction when confined to homemaking displays a lack of emotional health".

Her experience as civil rights activist is narrate in the short story *Selma* by Natalie Petesch. It is written as the diary of an activist, named Angelina, who wrote down her experience during the Selma to Montgomery march. These words, taken by the short story, could have been written by Viola Liuzzo herself, even if this is fiction. "We sang freedom songs, then rested, saving our breath for the march, for the gaps in our ranks that sometimes force us to run to catch up. We camped near Trickem Fork. It is cold, very cold. Temperature below freezing, I think. There are only two tents with kerosene heaters."[17] And this is a description of the march, "a strange looking procession" because among the participants there were "a blind man, a one-footed man, a one-eyed priest, and nuns in plastic coats, like sailors"[18]. Although these people came from different parts of the country and from different backgrounds, they were very close-knit because they were there for the same purpose. These people managed to create a feeling of "togetherness", they prayed and sang all together, they helped each other and they shared the toughness of the march. They walked, hand in hand in the rain and they

[16] Minnie Bruce Pratt, "*Viola Liuzzo: we are going to change the world*" in Workers World, published Mar 2, 2005. http://www.workers.org/us/2005/liuzzo-0310/

[17] Natalie L. M. Petesch, "Selma" in *After the first death there is no other*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press,1974

[18] Natalie L. M. Petesch, "Selma" in *After the first death there is no other*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press,1974

hoped that their efforts would be repaid. Hope and faith were the forces that convinced those people to march till Montgomery.

In the following passage Angelina/Mrs.Liuzzo tells about the hostility of racist people and the gratitude of those who, on the other hand, admired them for what they were doing. "People cried to us from the porches: "Freedom!" But it was restrained, as though it were a Passion Play. People ran to shake hands with one another. Somebody ran to me and took my hand as though to kiss it. He stood, smiling strangely, like a man filled with love or hate or both at once. Then he bowed, and raising up his camera slowly like a weapon took my picture. One girl spat upon the ground as I passes "Go to hell, nigger lover" she said."[19] Joining the African Americans protest meant also being humiliated and hated by other white people. White protesters were called "white nigger" and they run the risk of being beaten, as happened to Rev. Reeb, who died after having been clubbed by a group of whites on March 9, 1965. White protesters compromised their existence in order to follow their ideals.

Women were pivotal in the long African American struggle for civil rights, despite the fact that they are usually "excluded by historians and other academicians in movement accounts"[20]. What this search wants to demonstrate is that they deserved to be acknowledged because what they did was extraordinary and it changed the course of history. Their stories have been marginalized for too long, but we need to know about them, since their examples could inspire new generations and young leaders.

Unfortunately women were not usually recognized as leaders in that period because traditionally the ministers led the movement and there were no place for women. During the march to Washington no woman managed to speak, even if there were many activists, like Rosa Parks, who could have given a speech. Women have always found difficulties in getting their contributions recognized, but they were essential to support the civil rights movement and the organizations.

[19] Natalie L. M. Petesch, "Selma" in *After the first death there is no other*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press,1974

[20] Belinda Robnett, *How long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997

On the other hand Belinda Robnett wrote in her book titled *How long? How long? African-American women in the struggle for civil rights* that exited a "women's leadership" and that it took the form of "bridge leadership" which was needed to mobilize and sustain the movement. "African American women participated in leadership positions often served as the "bridge" between local civil rights struggles and national protest organizations. Charismatic figures, such as Martin Luther King and James Farmer, set the national civil rights agenda and moved from coast to coast generating moral and financial support for the civil rights campaigns. Many African Americans women leaders operated at the local level, establishing the links and connections with grassroots organizations that provide the mass support"[21].

This is exactly Amelia Robinson Boynton's role. She was highly respected in the community and when she was arrested in January 1965 a mass of people marched to the courthouse to get her released and when she was almost killed on Edmund Pettus Bridge people arrived from all over the nation to join the protest in Selma. Mass of people followed her example and this is the great contribution that this woman gave to the cause. It is important to highlight the achievements of women like her who while not being always recognized as leaders stepped forward to organize and direct when there was work to be done.

Another point worth mentioning is that "the civil rights movement was more than a battle for the right to vote, it was also a way through which people tried to find their personal identity and not only black people but also women"[22]. The civil rights movement provided a position from which to review gender relations. In fact as the movement reached its peak in 1965-1966, gender became a stated issue. And Viola Liuzzo is one of the first women who fought this double battle to stop racial and gender discrimination. She was a white woman and she wanted to make her voice heard and to stand up against injustice. Additionally she desired a better world for her children, a world free from segregation and racism. Starting from the African Americans freedom struggle, women felt the need to raise their consciousness and create their own personal

[21] Belinda Robnett, *How long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997

[22] Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, *Gender and the civil rights movement*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2004

and collective personality. As Sarah Evans had suggested, the distinction between the "personal" and "political" (or "public") sphere is construct and what happens in one can't be separated from what happens in the other. For this reason many women left their husbands and their children to join the protests, because they were concerned with what was going on in the world and they wanted to try to change something in order to assure a better future for everybody.

These women deeply believed in the cause to the extent that, they gave their lives for it. Viola Liuzzo was murdered while she was driving back to Selma on March 25, 1965 and Amelia Boynton Robinson's commitment to human and civil rights continues even today at the age of one hundred.

Black Americans won their struggle thanks to people like Amelia Boynton Robinson and Viola Liuzzo. These two women shook the conscience of the nation because their stories left a mark in the history. Their sacrifices, their courage, their obstinacy and perseverance have to be remembered and today they entered into literature and movies, a sort of modern way to memorialized people. Moreover Amelia Boynton Robinson is memorialized by the National Visionary Leadership Project, an organization that aimed to recording, preserving, and distributing through various media, the wisdom of extraordinary African American elders who have shaped American history. She wrote an autobiography titled *Bridge across the Jordan* and she travelled also to Europe where she brought her testimony and her experience in schools and universities. She is a member of LaRouche Movement and the vice-chairperson of the Schiller Institute. She was also awarded the Martin Luther King Medal of Freedom in 1990.

Viola Liuzzo joined the hundred of thousand, the millions of known and unknown Africans and African Americans who had fought and died for their freedom and her name is written in the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery.

These two women have been memorialized also in literature, as I said previously, and in 1999 Walt Disney shot a docudrama based on the book *Selma, Lord, Selma*. The attention that authors and directors gave to the topic is a clear signal that people understand the importance of making these stories known to the world. The stories of Amelia Boynton Robinson and Viola Liuzzo are only two examples, therefore we should remember also the teachers who marched for Amelia's release, the women who sang and prayed during the march with Viola Liuzzo and the children that first took part

into the marchers and forced their parents to join them, like Sheyann and Rachel. I would like to conclude with Sheyann Webb words: “I’m so proud of the people who did something in 1965 that was truly amazing. We were just people, ordinary people, and we did it.”[23] These words remind us that we have to learn from these women. We have to keep fighting for justice as they did in 1965, if we want the world to become a better place to live in. Remind them in order to not forget their legacy, this is the real purpose of collective memory.

[23] Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days as told to Frank Sikora*, Alabama The University of Alabama press Tuscaloosa, 1970.

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