WHERE WE’LL BE

Feb 2024
North Carolina Central University livestream

Mar
National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis

Apr
Howard University livestream

May
National Museum of African American History & Culture, D.C.

Sep
Prairie View A&M University livestream

Oct
National Center for Civil & Human Rights, Atlanta

Nov
Morehouse College livestream

Dec
International Civil Rights Center & Museum, Greensboro

For more info on livestreams and digital events

Feb 2025
Tougaloo College livestream

Mar
Museum of Mississippi History and Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, Jackson

Apr
Claflin University livestream

May
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Alabama

Photograph by Jim Peppler
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WHO WE ARE

In 2013, the SNCC Legacy Project, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, the Duke University Libraries, and humanities scholars formed a partnership—now called the Movement History Initiative (MHI)—to tell SNCC’s history of grassroots organizing with activists’ voices at the center and to pass movement knowledge on to subsequent generations. Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the SNCC and Grassroots Organizing Discussion Series is a collaborative project of the MHI, six Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and six civil rights and African American museums. It’s based at the Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University, another core MHI partner.

HBCU PARTNERS

Claflin University (Orangeburg, South Carolina); Howard University (Washington, D.C.); Morehouse College (Atlanta, Georgia); North Carolina Central University (Durham, North Carolina); Prairie View A&M University (Prairie View, Texas); Tougaloo College (Jackson, Mississippi)

MUSEUM PARTNERS

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (Birmingham, Alabama); International Civil Rights Center & Museum (Greensboro, North Carolina); Museum of Mississippi History and Mississippi Civil Rights Museum (Jackson, Mississippi); National Center for Civil and Human Rights (Atlanta, Georgia); National Civil Rights Museum (Memphis, Tennessee); National Museum of African American History and Culture (Washington, D.C.)

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THEMES

The “SNCC and Grassroots Organizing” series is focused on six distinct yet overlapping humanities themes that are at the heart of SNCC’s history of grassroots organizing: the organizing tradition, voting rights, Black Power, women and gender, freedom teaching, and art and culture in movement building. This series seeks to expand knowledge of SNCC’s grassroots community organizing and its relevance to ongoing efforts to build a “more just, inclusive, and sustainable society.” (NEH, A More Perfect Union Initiative) At its core, SNCC helped community members feel empowered to make choices and act on the issues that most impacted their lives and their communities. By engaging in discussions about SNCC’s organizing, we hope participants will be able to connect contemporary issues in their own lives and communities to central themes in SNCC’s history and the broader Black Freedom Struggle, while deepening their knowledge of the long and ongoing struggle for a more just and inclusive society.
On February 1, 1960, four African-American students from North Carolina A&T asked for service at a segregated lunch counter, and when their request was rejected, they refused to leave, “sitting in” until the business closed. In the days and weeks that followed, the sit-ins spread rapidly throughout the South, led primarily by students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with some white allies. The resulting sit-in movement launched the mass, direct action phase of the modern Civil Rights Movement and led directly to the April 1960 founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”).

It was Ms. Ella Baker, a long-time activist and then executive secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who called the young sit-in leaders together for a meeting at her alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. She saw tremendous potential in the students energizing this mass movement, and she encouraged them to make their own decisions and maintain their independence from other civil rights organizations. SNCC’s initial purpose was to coordinate campus-based activism, but the organization stepped forward in spring 1961 to continue the freedom rides when they faltered under the weight of massive segregationist violence in Alabama and a passive federal government. This part of SNCC’s history fits a familiar narrative of major events that made up the southern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Other aspects of SNCC’s history are much less visible.

SNCC made an important transition in summer and fall 1961 when roughly 16 young people affiliated with the organization made a full-time commitment to the Movement. They put their lives on hold—dropping out of or postponing school, giving up jobs—and moved into dangerous and isolated, rural southern communities to work on voter registration. First in McComb, Mississippi, then in Southwest Georgia, the Mississippi Delta, Selma and Lowndes County, Alabama, Arkansas, and beyond, the young people in SNCC became part of the communities they lived in, helping to cultivate and support existing leadership. In the process, they became an organization of organizers and, as the only youth-led civil rights organization, went door-to-door, person-to-person, building a south-wide movement demanding the vote and challenging systemic white supremacy.

They embraced and expanded the part of the Movement that Bob Moses later called “the organizing tradition,” an approach that their mentor Ms. Ella Baker and others, including Septima Clark and Myles Horton of Highlander Folk School, also used. A key aspect of the organizing tradition and SNCC’s work was a deep commitment to developing the strengths of everyday people and supporting them in becoming leaders. According to Charles Payne, this was at the heart of “community organizing, a tradition with . . . [an] emphasis on the long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women.” (Payne, I’ve Got the Light, esp. 3)
The local organizing tradition of the Civil Rights Movement is largely invisible to most people who are, instead, exposed to what SNCC veteran Julian Bond called “the master narrative.” (Payne, *Debating*) The master narrative has a top-down angle that focuses on big events, like the March on Washington and the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March, and highlights the actions of the federal government, national organizations like the NAACP, and well-known leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. From this angle, success is typically a result of distant events and actions that are beyond the capacity of most people.

SNCC’s work is visible in this history through the sit-ins and the 1964 Freedom Summer project in Mississippi, but most of the work they did in between and after these events—their most central organizing work—is missing from the popular understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

This absence matters because SNCC’s organizing represented a significant effort by everyday people to tackle the work of making the United States a “more perfect union.” Rather than wait for a leader like Dr. King or defer to someone like President John F. Kennedy, SNCC encouraged, inspired, and worked with regular people to persistently demand access to the vote and full citizenship. SNCC staffers were creative and proactive in supporting the fundamental work of voter registration and political organizing—teaching in citizenship schools, developing freedom schools, and creating cultural centers. Through their National Office in Atlanta, they trained and supported full-time photographers and developed Research and Communications Departments. The latter published press releases and *The Student Voice*, which they sent out to the Black press, mainstream newspapers, and their broad network of supporters, including Friends of SNCC. All these activities were instituted to empower the communities they lived and worked in and to gain support from a larger national and international audience.

The Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s had earlier roots and was part of a larger Black Freedom Struggle that began with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in what is now the United States. Many people also consider the Movement the “Borning Struggle”; that is, it inspired the progressive movements that followed, from Black Power to women’s liberation to environmental justice and queer rights. SNCC’s legacy, especially when it comes to organizing and an emphasis on collective leadership, has been especially important. In recent years, with the killing of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his killer, African Americans and their supporters across the country have taken to the streets, demanding justice. This in turn led to the now familiar chant, plea, and demand: Black Lives Matter! As current activists consider ways to go beyond marches and public demonstrations in order to organize communities for long-term political power and systemic change, many of them are looking to SNCC and the lessons that emerge from the less visible part of the organization’s history. While those who identify with the Movement for Black Lives, including newer and older organizations like the Dream Defenders, BYP100, and the Highlander Research and Education Center, are among those most connected to SNCC, the organization’s influence and lessons remain central to many groups and individuals who have organized for human and civil rights from the early 1960s onward.

Photograph by Jim Peppler
One of the most important things that made SNCC stand out during the modern Civil Rights Movement was its commitment to what Bob Moses called the “organizing tradition”—a long-term approach to social change that emphasizes the development of skills and leadership ability in so-called ordinary people. Ms. Ella Baker called on her deep understanding of that organizing tradition when she invited the sit-in leaders to the Easter 1960 meeting where SNCC was established. There, she encouraged the young people to establish their own organization and lead themselves instead of deferring to existing organizations and leaders.

When Bob Moses initiated SNCC’s first voter registration project in McComb, Mississippi, in 1961, he started by speaking with existing leaders and meeting potential supporters. The local movement grew as Moses, other SNCC staffers, and the local high school students who joined them spent hours and days going door-to-door, talking to people and inviting them to classes where they could practice the voter registration test. When one of their early supporters, a farmer and father of nine named Herbert Lee, was murdered by a member of the Mississippi state legislature, SNCC was forced to leave McComb. The local leadership withdrew its support,
believing that white repression had become too
great a threat to the local community. Although
they retreated this time, some of the McComb
young people left with them, joining SNCC and
devoting their lives to full-time organizing. This
was an early sign of SNCC’s effectiveness at
developing local leadership. A few years later,
SNCC returned to the community and never
again let violence stop a project.

SNCC used a similar approach when they
moved into other communities, reaching out
to established leaders and looking for those
with leadership ability who might not be
formally recognized. This approach is one of the
reasons that women were so central to SNCC’s
work—both within the organization and in the
communities they organized. At the same time,
Ms. Baker encouraged the young people in
SNCC not to dismiss those who might appear
too conservative. She believed everyone had a
contribution to make and everyone could grow.
SNCC field secretaries immersed themselves in
their communities, living with local families,
listening to their concerns and ideas, asking and
answering questions, laughing and joking, and
building trust.

Patience and determination were also central to
the organizing tradition. When Sam Block began
working in Greenwood, Mississippi, people would
cross the street to avoid him, afraid of the danger
associated with the Movement. He was evicted a
couple times and even spent a few nights sleeping
in an abandoned car. But Block persisted,
standing up to the local sheriff and walking the
streets, talking to people, and encouraging them
to attend mass meetings and voter registration
classes. A year later, when white supremacists
shot at a group of movement workers, almost
killing Jimmy Travis, the local community
welcomed the small army of SNCC staffers that
swarmed the community, making clear that they
would not be intimidated. Block’s persistence
had paid off, and now, instead of a handful of
people braving the registrar’s office and facing the
consequences virtually alone, hundreds of people
were demanding that they be allowed to try to
register to vote.

In Lowndes County, Alabama, when SNCC
worked with local people to develop an
independent political party, they encouraged
everyday people to run for office. To overcome
years of substandard education and exclusion
from the political process, SNCC held workshops
and created comics to teach people about
elective offices and show them that they and
their neighbors were not only capable of voting
for their representatives but could effectively
hold these positions themselves. As SNCC’s work
clearly demonstrated, the organizing tradition
valued the importance of everyone acting,
individually and collectively. It is a lesson that’s
still relevant today—change came not from the
top-down but from local communities moving
and acting together.
VOTING RIGHTS

SNCC moved into voting because Black southerners saw the vote as an essential tool for gaining political power and challenging the oppressive conditions they were living under. When Amzie Moore, an NAACP leader and World War II veteran, invited SNCC’s Bob Moses to work on voter registration in Mississippi, he pulled out a precinct map of the Delta and pointed to the untapped political power that, if accessed, would change not only the political reality of local towns and counties but also Congress and the nation.

Laying out plans for voter registration in 1962, SNCC explained their approach: “We are going to have to penetrate the rural areas, live with the people, develop their own leaders, and teach them the process of registration and effective use of the franchise. There will have to be workers travelling from county to county doing just that.” (SNCC VEP proposal in Forman, Making of Black Revolutionaries, 269) SNCC field secretaries were deeply committed, living and working with local people. They went door-to-door, day after day, talking and visiting, encouraging people to overcome their fear to try to register. SNCC staffers organized citizenship classes that taught people how to take the intimidating literacy tests and how to handle ridiculous questions—like how many bubbles in a bar of soap—that were intended to block Black voters.

Successful at building movements but unable to break the white supremacist stranglehold on voting, SNCC became increasingly creative. In October 1963, SNCC staff organized the first Freedom Day in Selma, Alabama, where the registrar’s office was open only twice a month.
By 11:00am there were more than 250 people in line, and by day’s end it extended the full length of the block, around the corner and halfway down the street. Local whites refused to let people leave and return to the line, and when SNCC field secretaries tried to deliver food and water to those waiting, they were attacked with clubs and cattle prods. The FBI and Justice Department representatives stood by watching. Despite all of this, SNCC considered the day a great success. Hundreds of people faced down white violence and the threat of job loss to insist on their right to vote, even knowing it was almost certainly futile in the short term.

In Mississippi, SNCC organized the 1964 Freedom Summer project, which included voter registration, community center work, freedom schools, and the establishment of a statewide Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The idea behind the MFDP was twofold: to illustrate the extent to which the state was blocking Black political participation by challenging the regular all-white Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and to build a local political organization across the state that could be basis for Black political power.

In early 1965, the determination of local people and SNCC’s deep organizing work paid off as demonstrations in Selma forced the country to finally reckon with Black disfranchisement and pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The final push for voting rights included a march from Selma to Montgomery, which traveled through Lowndes County, Alabama, a county with an 81 percent Black population and no Black registered voters. SNCC staffers used the march to meet Lowndes residents, laying the foundation for an extensive voter registration campaign. When the Voting Rights Act made registering easier, SNCC worked with local partners to build the Lowndes County Freedom Party (LCFP), an independent party that was an alternative to both major parties. It was easy for Black folks to understand the need for something different: Alabama’s dominant Democratic Party had as its logo a white rooster surrounded by the words, “White Supremacy for the Right.” The new Freedom Party demonstrated the potential for building Black political power at the local level and became the basis for SNCC’s June 1966 call for Black Power.

Ms. Baker told SNCC it was essential to build leadership skills for the long-term struggle. She would point out that a grassroots movement did it once and insist that a grassroots movement can do it again.

The Voting Rights Act was transformative. Across the South Black people registered in huge numbers and many were elected to local offices. But in recent years, the U.S. Supreme Court has been chipping away at—and ultimately gutting—the Voting Rights Act, while voter suppression tactics, many familiar to Black southerners, are on the rise. The 2013 Shelby v. Holder case and others reinforce just how critical grassroots organizing is in securing access to the vote. Ms. Baker told SNCC it was essential to build leadership skills for the long-term struggle. She would point out that a grassroots movement did it once and insist that a grassroots movement can do it again.
Black Power is often associated with SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael, who publicized the phrase in June 1966 during the Meredith March Against Fear that traveled through the Mississippi Delta. While African Americans largely embraced the call for Black Power, many others have misunderstood it as angry, anti-white rhetoric. These false narratives miss Black Power’s true meaning and deep roots in SNCC’s work and thinking. SNCC’s very first voter registration effort grew out of Amzie Moore’s vision for Black political power. Moore explained at the group’s second gathering in October 1960 that while he supported school desegregation and sit-ins, what Black Mississippians needed was leverage for improving their daily lives. He was clear that voter registration was a tool that would allow local Black majorities to claim political power and change their lives. Influenced by their work with rural Black southerners like Moore, as well as by the larger national and international context, SNCC understood Black Power in terms of political and economic power, Black Consciousness, and institution building. One example of this is the work SNCC and their allies did during the 1964 Freedom Summer project to develop freedom schools and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, parallel institutions intended to supplement, replace, and challenge the existing institutions that were failing or excluding African Americans.

SNCC’s call for Black Power was very much based on the organization’s immersion in the self-reliance and rich cultural traditions of the rural Black communities they lived and worked in. It became more explicit and more political in Lowndes County, after the passage of the Voting Rights Act made Black voter registration more feasible. In a county where approximately 81 percent of the population was Black, SNCC and their local allies considered the limits of their existing options—a racist state Democratic Party or a nationally mixed, but locally non-existent Republican Party. SNCC’s Courtland Cox pointed out, “The Negroes of Lowndes County want a political grouping that is controlled by them. They want a political grouping that is responsive to the[ir] needs.” (Cox, “What Would It Profit?”)

Based on this idea, SNCC worked with local residents to form the Lowndes County Freedom Party. According to SNCC staffer
Gloria House, “we were helping to equip the people with the information and skills essential to running the county themselves not just as new voters but also as political leaders.” (House in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 528) SNCC sought to elect people to office who would work for the betterment of the whole community. The LCFP developed its platform before nominating candidates and chose candidates who reflected the community’s goals. Alice Moore, who ran for tax assessor, announced that she would “tax the rich to feed the poor.” (Moore profile, *SNCC Digital Gateway*) As part of this effort, SNCC developed political education workshops and accessible materials like comic books to teach local people who had been excluded from political participation about the roles and expectations of various government officials.

SNCC’s use of the phrase “Black Power” had deep roots in their work with rural southern communities. According to Courtland Cox, Black Power meant: “1) the power to define oneself; 2) the power to control one’s own condition and vote to control one’s own community; and 3) the power to use politics to enhance one’s own economic condition.” (Cox, MHI Founding Meeting) The common stereotypes of Black Power as violent and anti-white obscure a complex and nuanced understanding of the thinking and tactics that made up the Black Freedom Movement. At its heart, Black Power was about valuing African Americans and maximizing collective action on behalf of Black well-being—concepts that remain critically important today.
Despite the sexism of the era, SNCC women emphasize that the organization gave them extraordinary opportunities to develop and grow. Ms. Ella Baker’s influence, SNCC’s youth, and the group’s commitment to the organizing tradition all predisposed the organization to the essential contributions of women. From the organization’s founding onward, women insisted on full participation. They were central to SNCC’s staff, working in the field as organizers, actively shaping discussions, and making decisions and playing key roles in the Atlanta office.

As important as the women on SNCC’s staff were, the Movement was built on the many women and girls who were at the heart of SNCC’s community work. Women outnumbered men in trying to register to vote, attending mass meetings, talking to others about registering, and providing food and shelter for movement workers. Women, like men, were willing to stand guard all night to protect their homes and the movement workers staying with them. Charles Sherrod described the importance of the typical “movement mama,” as “a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share.” (Sherrod, “On Cucumbers” in Forman, 275-77)

SNCC’s approach made space for anyone to be a leader. Bernice Johnson Reagon, who joined the Movement as a college student in Albany, Georgia, explained that leadership was based on what you did, not who you were. (Reagon, “Borning Struggle,” 22) When SNCC’s Charles McLaurin went on his first trip to the courthouse in 1962, all three of the pioneers willing to brave white resistance were women. Women also dominated the group of 18 that police harassed the following week. When lawmen arrested the SNCC workers and forced the group to pool their money and pay a fine because the bus was “too yellow,” it was Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer who kept everyone calm by filling the bus with church songs. That night Mrs. Hamer was fired and evicted when she refused to remove her name from the roll of potential voters. She soon came to epitomize SNCC’s ability to find, support, and develop nontraditional leaders, many of them women. She fed people and encouraged neighbors to try to register, ran for Congress, and represented her community at the national Democratic Convention in August 1964.

These aspects of women’s contributions to and experiences in SNCC have been overshadowed by two misunderstood and misused events: a 1964 Position Paper on Women spearheaded by SNCC staffers Casey Hayden and Mary King and Stokely Carmichael’s joking response. Carmichael’s joke has been portrayed as a serious comment and, in conjunction with details from the position paper, has been used to portray SNCC as a sexist organization. SNCC organizers were undoubtedly influenced by the sexism of the larger society; at the time, women faced discrimination in hiring, educational barriers, and gendered stereotypes. But as Bernice Johnson Reagon explained in an interview, “If you wanted to go in the field and somebody didn’t want you to go into the field because you were a woman, that was their opinion . . . but it never stopped you from doing it. . . . [T]he structure of that organization was such that you were the only person who could limit
what you did. And you had to find the courage to challenge anything that didn’t feel right to you.” (Reagon in Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 39-40)

In a society that still assumed male leadership, women in SNCC stepped up and, in the words of Jean Wheeler Smith Young, did “anything” that they were “big enough to do.” SNCC’s openness to women—strongly influenced by its commitment to the organizing tradition—made it unusual and particularly significant. SNCC was well ahead of every other organization when it came to women’s equality and helped inspire the Women’s Liberation Movement. Both the women and the men were on the cutting edge of challenging gender conventions and creating room for everyone’s contribution.

FREEDOM TEACHING

Freedom teaching was deeply embedded in SNCC’s day-to-day work and modeled in projects like the citizenship and freedom schools. At one level, freedom teaching was about having thoughtful conversations and building relationships. Stokely Carmichael recalled that Ms. Ella Baker once pulled him aside and encouraged him to be more patient. She pointed out that organizers needed to make sure the people they worked with understood the issues. Ms. Baker explained, “Of course it’s important that we all agree. But it’s just as important that we all understand. However long that takes. We have to work with people where they are. . . . Some are dealing with these questions for the first time. But they are learning and soon they’ll be speaking. In SNCC, they have to feel free to speak and that’s important however long it takes.” (Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 301) Especially for people who had been denied
a quality education and excluded from political participation for generations, SNCC’s freedom teaching was essential to building confidence, knowledge, and skill.

From their earliest days of working on voter registration in McComb, Mississippi, SNCC field secretaries held classes to show people how to fill out the intimidating voter registration form that was designed to block access to the vote. SNCC’s day-to-day work with communities was influenced not only by Ms. Baker, but also by Highlander Folk School and its belief that people learned best from their peers. For example, Highlander discouraged people with teaching credentials or higher education from taking the lead in their literacy classes. This fit with SNCC’s commitment to developing leaders based on their actions, not their credentials.

One of SNCC’s most notable experiments with freedom teaching was the 1964 freedom schools proposed by field secretary Charlie Cobb. Built around a two-part curriculum that included Black history and the skills and ideas connected with citizenship, the schools attracted both very young and very old students and everyone in between. In freedom schools, the students read and wrote poetry, published their own newspapers, and were encouraged to think critically. At the end of the summer, delegates from more than 40 schools gathered in Meridian, Mississippi, and created their own political platform. It demonstrated the vibrant work students had done and included proposals for more equitable and appropriate education, health care, housing, job access, civil liberties, law enforcement, and approach to international issues, among other things.

SNCC experimented with different ways to teach people to read well enough to pass the difficult literacy tests, often given only to Black residents. Maria Varela’s first job with SNCC was teaching in an “underground literacy project” in Selma, Alabama. Frustrated that most adult literacy materials were irrelevant to rural Black southerners, she began creating more engaging and appropriate teaching materials that also documented local knowledge. After relocating to Mississippi, Varela used her newly developed photography skills and the words of local people to create what her SNCC colleague Worth Long called “freedom handbooks.” One was Something of Our Own, a booklet that described the work of Batesville, Mississippi, farmers as they created an okra co-op. Varela also created filmstrips to help educate local people with accessible and familiar materials. Over in Lowndes County, SNCC’s Jennifer Lawson and Courtland Cox developed the comic book, “Us Colored People,” to teach people excluded from the electoral process about voting and elected positions. This effort demonstrates SNCC’s deep commitment to political education and highlights the difference between encouraging people to vote and helping them understand the workings of their democratic society and its relevance to their daily lives.

While progressive educators continue to use SNCC’s freedom schools as a model, the freedom teaching embedded in the organizing tradition is crucial to the larger project of creating a “more perfect union” and a just society, one that encourages participation and develops the skills of all people.
Art and culture, especially singing, was an integral part of SNCC’s movement building. Singing was everywhere in the Movement—it was at the heart of mass meetings and kept up morale in jail. It calmed fears, brought people together, offered encouragement, claimed space, provided a vehicle for identifying key issues, and helped people call out white oppressors—like the local sheriff or mayor. Charles Sherrod, who organized in Albany, Georgia, recalled the community’s first mass meeting where he “threw my head back and closed my eyes as I sang with my whole body.” The goal of the meeting was to create unity, and there was definitely unity. Sherrod remembered, “We rose to sing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ [and] nobody knew what kept the top of the church on its four walls. It was as if everyone had been lifted up on high.” (Sherrod in Forman, Making of Black Revolutionaries, 247)

When Sam Block began organizing in Greenwood, Mississippi, he found that freedom songs drew people to mass meetings, even when they were cautious or afraid. People who had been crossing the street to avoid him, asked when they would be able to gather again for more singing. Block reflected, “I began to see the music itself as an important organizing tool to really bring people together—not only to bring them together but also as the organizational glue to hold them together.” (Block in Payne, I’ve Got the Light, 147) Bernice Johnson Reagon, a college student recruited into the Movement by Sherrod, explained that singing was the heart of mass meetings, “nurturing the people,” and doing “most of the work . . . in terms of taking care of movement business.” (Reagon Eyes on the Prize interview, in Carson, et al., ed. 144-45) The powerful singing in the Albany Movement birthed the SNCC Freedom Singers, who traveled the country, raising money and sharing the story of the Movement.

While singing and freedom songs were especially important, SNCC was infused with creativity. It was the first movement organization to hire a staff photographer, and soon began training staff and community people to take and develop photos. SNCC used these images to document the Movement, limit violence, fundraise, and create informational pamphlets and teaching materials. Lowndes County was home to one of SNCC’s most ambitious efforts to combine art, culture, and education. Jennifer Lawson and Courtland Cox developed comic books and other easy-to-engage materials designed to explain voting, political organizing, and political offices to people who had been excluded from electoral politics.

Freedom Summer and freedom schools opened up other opportunities for creativity. Freedom school students wrote poetry and published newspapers. They and their communities got to see dynamic plays put on by the Free Southern Theater, which the group’s founders developed to provide opportunities for expression and a way to learn outside the “distortions” of traditional
media and beyond the “inferior education in segregated Southern schools.” (FST Proposal, 1) In the tradition of the Movement, the Free Southern Theater sponsored workshops and encouraged people to attend rehearsals and write their own plays.

SNCC’s use of art and culture models creative ways to reach and sustain people as they work for a more “just, inclusive, and sustainable society.” (NEH, A More Perfect Union Initiative) Bill Moyers once challenged Bernice Johnson Reagon about the ongoing relevance of freedom songs, and she responded that, while the music might change, it would always be part of any struggles for freedom.
In summer 1962, Charles McLaurin was among a group of homegrown Mississippians who moved into communities in the Mississippi Delta, talking to people and encouraging them to try to register to vote or attend a mass meeting. In this document, McLaurin describes the first time he took a group of people to try to register to vote, on Aug. 22, 1962 in Sunflower County, Mississippi. His account gives a sense of how much the threat of white violence permeated the community, which was evident when only three of the ten people who had agreed to come actually showed up. Despite his initial disappointment, McLaurin soon concluded that “a faithful few were better than an uncertain ten.” Initially terrified as they drove to the county courthouse, a major symbol of white power, he gained confidence from the three older ladies who stepped proudly and confidently forward in the face of danger. In typical SNCC fashion the people they recruited had become the leaders. Whites tried to shut down SNCC’s voter registration work, evicting and firing potential applicants and shooting into the homes of leaders, but SNCC field secretaries and local Black folks persisted. This document provides insight into the organization’s approach of looking to local people for leadership while also illustrating the centrality of women in SNCC’s early work in the Mississippi Delta.

Based on the document, what context was McLaurin organizing and working in? How does he illustrate the reality of white power?

How does McLaurin’s approach—and what he learned from this experience—reflect SNCC’s use of the organizing tradition?

What does he say about leadership? What does he conclude about the importance of numbers when it comes to participation? What clues do we get about the way women and men responded to the voter registration drive?
TO OVERCOME FEAR

by Charles McLaurin

The first people that I accompanied to the Sunflower County Courthouse in Indianola, Miss., gave me the spirit and courage to continue.

I will always remember August 22, 1962 as the day that I became a man. It was on this day that I was to test myself for courage and the ability to move in the face of fear and danger, danger such as I had never faced before.

About 7:30 a.m. that morning, I had been around to the homes of people who had given me their names as persons willing to go to the courthouse and attempt to register to vote. I was very disappointed, I had only been able to find three of the ten. The other because of fear had left home rather than say so to me.

Since, I was going down to the Courthouse for my first time I too was afraid; not of dying and not of the man (Mr. Charlie) per se, but of the powers the sheriff's department, the police department, the courts; these are the powers and the forces which keep Negroes in their so-called places. The night riders would not be so fearful if it wasn't for the sheriff who would be on their sides, or the policemen who would arrest the Negroes who had been shot by the mob, for breach of the peace. The Negro just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. So for this reason and many others, this poor Negro must face a hostile police court, he must stand before a prejudiced judge and be sent to the County Farm or the State prison, for a crime committed by others whose skin happened to be lighter and brighter, this is the system and the effects of that system and of the people subjected to the system.

So much for the in-between. About 8 a.m., I had only three people to go to the courthouse, this was the day I learned that the numbers were not important. I learned that a faithful few was better than an uncertain ten.

These three old ladies whose ages ranged from 65 to 85, knew the white man and his ways, they knew him because they had lived worked and raised families on his plantations, and on this day, they would come face to face with his sons and daughters to say, "We Must be Free!" Now!

Tommie Johnson, son of one of the ladies active in the movement in Ruleville was to carry us down in his car. About 8:30 Tommie came to where I was staying and we went to pick up the three old ladies. After we had them in the car; off we went, down the highway south on 49 highway.

We drove past an American service station operated by three white brothers known as the Woolenhams. These were bad brothers. They were known to beat up Negroes getting off the Greyhound bus when it put them off there. They also pulled guns on Negroes who asked for air in their car tires. As we passed this station I could not help but watch to see if they noticed the car, for this
car had taken six brave ladies down weeks earlier, and all the white people knew it. On and on passing the people in the cotton fields; trucks and busses along the sides of the highway; men, women and children moving to rhythm of the beat of the hoe; working hoping and forever saying "lord, my time ain't long, this work will soon be over, I'll be free."

Now Doddsville, five miles south of Ruleville. Doddsville is the home of U.S. Senator Eastland, James O. Eastland that is.

The light turned red just as our car reached the intersection and we stopped. A strange little place this was, five or six buildings old and run down from the years when cotton was King and the Negroes were even more plentiful than they are today. Doddsville where many years ago the burning of Negroes was a Sunday spectacle, where whites young and old delighted at this evil which killed the spirit of the old Negroes and set the stage for the place-fixing of young ones not yet born.

On and on my eyes taking in as much at a glance as possible. The old ladies talking telling the stories of the years gone by; me with knees shaking mouth closed tightly so as to not let them hear the fear in my voice. I am feeling the movement of the car and the rumbling of the motor as we move on and on towards our destination, Indianola, county seat of Sunflower County. As we move past the little town of Sunflower one of the old ladies said, "Won't be long now". At that moment my heart seemed to stop; fear, so much fear, realizing what danger could lie ahead for us especially me. A smart Nigger trying to change a way of life liked by everyone; at least it seemed that way.

Indianola, the city limits of Indianola, state of Mississippi; county of Sunflower I am the police. These are the words of Indianola's trusted police officer, Officer Shark. As we move into the city passing the number of gas stations along highway 82 I could almost speak now. I was going to face the man (Mr. Charlie) in the courthouse. I was filled with fear but this I must do; do this or continue to die. Not that I was dead and walking as such, but one who is alive in real life but dead in mind, dead in ability to say do or act in a way that would give attention to one's presence in society.

We turned off the highway and again we drove south, this time through a neighborhood, a white neighborhood. Then around a corner and there was the courthouse the police station and the sheriff's department. All of the big pavers together. He pulled up in front of the Courthouse. The building was an old faded brick type with a fourth door that opened on a different street.

As I opened the door to get out I got a feeling in my stomach that made me feel weak. Sweat started to form on my forehead and my mouth became moist. At this point I was no longer in command, the three old ladies were leading me. I was following them. They got out of the car and went up the walk to the courthouse as if this was the long walk that lead to the Golden Gate of Heaven, their heads held high. I watched from a short distance behind them; the pride with which they walked. The strong convictions that they held. I watched
as they walked up the steps into the building. I stepped outside outside the door and waited, thinking how it was that these ladies who have been victimized by white faces all of their lives would suddenly walk up to the man and say, I want to vote. This did something to me. It told me something. It was like a voice speaking to me, as I stood there alone, in a strange place and an unknown land. This voice told me that although these old ladies knew the risk involved in their being there they were still willing to try. It said you are the light, let it shine and the people will know you, and they will follow you, if you show the way they will go, with or without you.

So they did, I ask one night; I told them what to do and when that day came I followed them. The people are the true leaders. We need only to move them; to show them. Then watch and learn.

The ladies came out of the courthouse and found me day-dreaming. They told me that the man in the office had told them that the office was closed. At that I went to see. I tried to open the door but it was locked. I knocked but no one opened the door. I went back to where the ladies were and we went back to the car.

As we drove away I looked back at this place, called Indianola for one day real soon I would make a speech on these grounds. Surrounded by hundreds. That dream came true 3 1/2 years later. When we held one of the greatest Freedom days in the state around the courthouse.

Charles McLaurin
Charles Sherrod was one of SNCC’s founders, and though he had considerable experience with direct action and a strong commitment to nonviolence, by spring 1961, he was pushing the organization to move into voter registration. He was among SNCC’s first 16 field secretaries, the students who postponed school or put off “real” jobs in exchange for full-time movement work with subsistence pay—when there was money for paychecks. After working with Bob Moses in McComb, Mississippi, Sherrod headed to Albany and Southwest Georgia where he initiated SNCC’s second voter registration project. In fall 1961, he successfully organized the Movement’s first community-wide mass movement where adults joined students in going to jail. Then he turned to organizing voter registration drives in the nearby majority Black counties of Terrell and Lee. In a 1964 paper, Sherrod referred to the “wisdom of the pinched toe and empty belly,” (Sherrod, Position Paper #13) lessons that almost certainly came out of the hard work of doing voter registration in poor, rural communities.

In the excerpt below, Sherrod gives a sense of how challenging that voter registration work could be, given the fear caused by white retaliatory physical and economic violence. He also highlights the tedium and limited resources, as well as the central role of women.

Based on Sherrod’s account, what sense do you get of the kind of work SNCC organizers did on a daily basis? How did they try to “organize” the community and encourage people to register to vote?

What challenges does Sherrod describe? What made SNCC’s work difficult?

What does Sherrod say about the importance of women generally and the specific women SNCC was relying on?
There we were, about sixteen miles away from Albany, the mighty fortress, and eighteen other miles away from every other where, way back in the deep woods. We stayed at “Mama Dolly’s” house. She is a gray-haired old lady of about seventy who can pick more cotton, “slop more pigs,” plow more ground, chop more wood, and do a hundred more things better than the best farmer in the area. We received threats on the telephone, strange automobiles approached under cover of darkness, and a shoe box-sized package was found in the mailbox, possibly a bomb. It disappeared before it could be investigated. We were steadily making a “bee line” to the registrar’s office and having meetings each Saturday night. Can you imagine what this means—Saturday night in a small county which knows only wine, women and song for recreation—on Saturday night, those people are singing Freedom songs in a little wooden church somewhere in the back country. And the meeting is peopled by the folk of Sumter County, Albany, and Terrell County; all come together on a Saturday night in Lee.

At the same time we were also engaged in a similar program in Terrell County, living there as in Lee on the three C’s of health, well, at least our health—crackers, cucumbers, and collards. We had a few squash thrown in by well-wishers. But half-starved, holes in the bottoms of our shoes, we were walking long county miles in Lee and Terrell counties, hearing “I’m scared” over and over and over and wanting to yell “hell lady, I’m scared too, so what!”

It was in Terrell, called “Terrible Terrell” or “Tombstone Territory” by the high school students, that opposition first crystallized. It was about 8:30 on the evening of our Voter Registration meeting and we had just begun. In walked about ten white men into our church, smoking, hats on, talking, flashlights, guns, clubs and billies, and looking mean. They took over after asking for a word. They stayed for more than an hour. They took names of people at the meeting and finally left—to remain [outside] in front of the church. This was not the only time they had “taken over,” the people were afraid and so were we, but nobody showed it. That night we sang as if they were listening in New York. And they were, for the Times carried the story the next day.

They were also listening across the country when, in Lee County, where we used to meet—Shady Grove Baptist Church—the first burning occurred (Aug. 15, 1962). The Sheriff said that it might have been lightning. The burning was undoubtedly a scare tactic. On Saturday night we had a full crowd walking and talking and singing and praying about Freedom. The people of Lee County were angry and showed it. Some came now who had previously had been afraid to. There followed the two burnings in Sasser in Terrell County (Sept. 9, 1962). The churches had been completely destroyed, leveled to a ground of hot cinders. The only thing standing was the chimney.

Only a week before, our headquarters had been shot up. In Terrell we live with Mrs. Carolyn Daniels, a young divorcee, in a three-room cinder block structured house. She is the “mama” for us there. There is always a “mama.” She is usually a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share. [...]

Out of the night that covered us, pitch black, there were two blasts. Chatfield crouched, gliding into where I was. Suddenly, he snaps around, explaining quite surprisingly but not too excited—“I’m hit.” Prathia Hall and Christopher Allen were grazed, one on the finger, the other on the arm. We were all on the floor. We were working together on Voter Registration. We had been shot at. Some
were hit. There was blood. We were afraid. Where was the Federal Government? We crawled about on the floor as if we were in Korea on Pork Chop Hill.

There were some shootings in Lee County. In one home there were twenty-four shots. We had about twelve. Four homes were fired into. The meetings continued in Lee and Terrell. Another church was burned—I hope Baptist Church (in Terrell County on Sept. 15). An attempt was made to disconnect this from any effort to register Negroes. They found men who admitted to the burning. They had been drinking. But the head deacon there is a staunch supporter of the drive to register people. Plus the whole family of Braziers go to this church. The 1960 report of the Civil Rights Commission describes the brutal killing of one James Brazier and the injunction proceedings brought against officials because of it....

This is “the Movement.” These are the people on whose backs, in the heat of the day, the South was built. It will be through them again that the South as it exists today will be destroyed. Albany means progress to these people, the possibility that White is not always right and Negroes may stick together sometimes. Last Wednesday we met in a tent on ground which has been cleared off for the rebuilding of the church. We had about fifty people from Albany. Six months ago, maybe four, maybe less or more, you couldn’t have paid these people of Albany enough to come to Dawson, Sasser, or anywhere else in Terrell County. But something has happened here in southwest Georgia which has a good chance of becoming the pattern for our grand strategy in the South. And we go about our way, feeling in the darkness.... And the world listens and looks on, wondering.

Charles Sherrod.

Photograph by Danny Lyon
Written in 1965, McLaurin’s “Notes on Organizing,” synthesizes many of the lessons SNCC learned about community-based work. He highlights the importance of encouraging or developing local leadership, explains ways to work with people to identify the issues they are concerned about, and offers tips for organizing mass meetings that promote local leaders. He emphasizes the importance of getting to know people, of being patient and persistent, and of the need for canvassing and talking with people about their needs, even when people feared the danger posed by organizers. The organizing tradition that McLaurin describes here was central to SNCC’s voter registration work, and it is something that SNCC learned from their most important mentor, Ms. Ella Baker.

McLaurin observes that, unless the organizer lived in the community, they should “never take a leadership role.” For SNCC and McLaurin, this meant supporting the work of people like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer who first tried to register to vote on Aug. 31, 1962 in a harrowing experience. Though police tried to intimidate the bus full of people and later that evening she was forced to choose between the movement and keeping her home and job on a plantation, Mrs. Hamer was determined to vote. Her emergence as a leader epitomized SNCC’s approach and the goal of this kind of organizing. When SNCC needed someone the community respected to run for Congress in 1964, they looked to Mrs. Hamer. McLaurin was her campaign manager, illustrating the relationship between organizer and local leader. After moving to Sunflower County with SNCC, McLaurin never left, and, like others in SNCC, he made his movement home, his life-long home. McLaurin remained Mrs. Hamer’s close friend, confidante, and supporter for as long as she lived.

What does McLaurin emphasize about leadership? What does he suggest for identifying and building leadership? What steps does he encourage organizers to follow?

What approaches does he suggest for organizing a community?

How might you apply this general approach to contemporary issues you are concerned about?
Notes on Organizing
by Charles McLaurin

Since I am under the impression that SNCC workers are organizers, I think that this is what they should do.

A SNCC worker should never take a leadership role in the community unless he is in his own community. A SNCC worker should give the responsibility of leadership to the community person or persons whom he has or is building. The SNCC worker should give form and guidance to the peoples' organization, and/or their programs.

I think that in each area one faces different kinds of problems. I've attempted to state some of the problems found in small communities such as Ruleville and Indianola, Miss.

The larger, more middle-class communities will be somewhat different.

I think you at first meet the people on their own terms, or you loose.

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Entering the Community

There are two ways to enter a community: the invited and the uninvited way.

The invited is the easiest, because you know that somebody wants you. Somebody will put you up for a while, and through this person or persons, you will meet others.

An invited person goes to live with X person in Y community, Mr. X carries the person to church on Sunday. He introduces him to his friends and neighbors. You are there to do a job which at this time is undefined; so you act friendly, smiling and greeting the ladies as they approach you. Then, with your warm, friendly face you say to the people; "I want to do something for this community." That afternoon you are asked out to someone's home for dinner. Go, because this is one time you will be able to talk with a family, or maybe several families. Remember, try to answer all questions asked of you at this point, because you are on trial. You must impress, as well as express.

An uninvited worker faces many difficulties; first, he is unexpected and in many cases unwated by the do-nothing leaders of the community. He is a stranger to the people, and therefore, he is alone in a strange place. If he is to be successful, he must become a part of the community.
How One Becomes a Part of the Community

First, get a place to stay. It is best to get a place in the community, with a well-known family. Once you have a place to stay, you have made the first contact in the community; however, in many cases it will not be as easy as writing words on paper.

It may just happen that you are not able to find a place for weeks; but do not give up. You may have to get a room in a rooming house; but try to stay as close to the community as possible. This will enable you to spend long hours in the community without worrying about a way home afterwards.

Making Contact

Since you have found a place to stay, say with a family, then the work starts, and it starts just as do most things, in the home.

You should spend as much time as the family has talking to them, because they have information about the people -- both white and black. They have been there all of their lives; they know the community; they know the people who will help. Take time and talk to them; ask questions, for it is here that you get real community education.

Now you know the key people in the community, from this talk with the family. But some of them work work out; do not get discouraged. Keep on pushing.

Canvas the whole community one afternoon. Talk with the people, laugh with them, joke with them; do most anything that gets some attention on you, or on some kind of conversation. It is very important to learn what bugs them. It may happen that they are thinking about trying to get the vote. You'll know when they talk.

The most important thing is to move the community by action; the community will move when the people move. The people will move when they are motivated.

Some Ways of Motivating People

Canvas two or three days, the first week. Do not worry too much about what you hear from the people. If you just talk and ask questions, some of them may talk about Chicago or Welfare checks; this is good, this is what is on their minds presently.

During canvassing, be sure to take down the names and addresses of the people who talked, who seemed to you that there is hope in them. This could be only two people; or it could be ten. No matter what the number is, these are contacts. You have a small group of people. Now you need a place to meet with them. Try to get a church or an empty building if you cannot get either, use one of the person's homes for a meeting place. Again, start with the people where you live; ask to hold the meeting there.
BUILDING LEADERS

The reason for using this home is that you have now found that dependable leadership does not exist. You must, from this little group, find and build a leader or leaders. How?

In this meeting, plan some kind of action. You put suggestions before the group. Let them talk over the suggestions, about paved streets, stop signs, street lights, or recreational facilities, and how the vote can get these and more.

You may need to hold ten or more of these kinds of meetings; at the same time, trying to get a church, getting the word out about the house meeting by leafletting or word of mouth. But let it get out! Elect a chairman to chair the meetings; you should not do this after the first meeting. Each meeting, give more and more of the responsibilities to this group, and as the group grows, form committees so as to involve more of the people.

To overcome the fear, many of the things above mentioned will apply. By getting the people together, they will see that they are not alone. By stopping by each one's home as much as possible, you will let them know you are sincere, in what you say and do -- that you not only care about the meetings but you are interested in continued progress in their community and family life. The feeling of being close together will help overcome the fear.

Apathy will disappear when you give the people some responsibility. When you subject them to association with each other, through the conversations of personal and community problems, the apathy will disappear. At first the family educated you; now together they are educating each other.

Suspicion comes from mistrust. So many have led us wrong, that it is hard to trust people we don't know. You must be friendly, reliable, and most of all trustworthy. With this, suspicion will disappear. When the people trust you and trust your judgment, suspicion will be a thing of the past.

Charles McLaurin
Ms. Ella Baker was unquestionably SNCC’s most important mentor and advisor. She was also, as SNCC’s Ivanhoe Donaldson insisted, a “giant of the 20th century,” comparable to W. E. B. DuBois, and a fierce fighter, not just for “civil rights,” but for “justice” and “human rights.” After bringing the sit-in students together to establish SNCC, Ms. Baker decided to stay in the South, securing part-time jobs with the YWCA and then the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), which gave her the flexibility she needed to spend most of her time nurturing and supporting SNCC. In the short film, *Ella Baker: Bigger than a Hamburger*, SNCC veterans and allies pay tribute to Ms. Baker, while describing the grassroots organizing strategies she taught SNCC organizers. The short video essentially offers a point-by-point introduction to SNCC’s organizing tradition. Though Ms. Baker has never had the visibility of people like DuBois or Dr. King, her dedication to the grassroots organizing tradition and her commitment to teaching it to others means that her legacy will continue to live on.

What do SNCC veterans and allies emphasize about the way Ms. Baker treated them and others? What tips or lessons did she emphasize in her work with SNCC?

How might you utilize some of Ms. Baker’s and SNCC’s approach to issues that are of concern to you and others in your community?

Given the way SNCC veterans and allies talk about Ms. Baker, can you identify elements of her approach in SNCC’s own documents and approach?
SNCC was organizing in Lowndes County, Alabama, known as “Bloody Lowndes,” when the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed. Although it was a crucial piece of legislation and served as an essential tool in ending the disfranchisement of African Americans, SNCC’s Courtland Cox pointed out that it raised questions about what newly enfranchised Black southerners could do with their hard won vote. In Lowndes County, SNCC continued the difficult challenge of helping African Americans register to vote, while also working with local people to develop the Lowndes County Freedom Party, an independent, all-Black political party that would address problems facing those who had been excluded from decision-making. In Cox’s words, the new political party would work for “those who are illiterate, those who have poor educations, those of low income, that is to say, those who are [considered] unqualified in this society.” (Cox, “What Would It Profit?”) Through the LCFP, SNCC encouraged local citizens to run for office and take on the leadership of their own communities.

To help people who had been excluded from voting and political participation for almost a century understand the inner workings of elective positions like coroner and tax assessor, SNCC staffers Jennifer Lawson and Courtland Cox developed comic books,
including “Us Colored People,” to explain the roles and duties of those positions. SNCC also organized political education workshops to help people further develop their leadership skills and envision themselves not only voting but serving in countywide elective positions. The comic follows Mr. Blackman and the emerging movement as it grows from individual acts of courage to a collective effort and the establishment of the LCFP, with its Black Panther symbol.

“Us Colored People” illustrates important elements at the heart of SNCC’s work as it developed from summer 1961 through 1966, including the organization’s commitment to teaching and developing the skills and leadership ability of local people. It also demonstrates SNCC’s understanding of the link between voter registration and Black political power and shows how SNCC drew on Black cultural traditions as they worked with people who had been explicitly excluded from quality education and voting for almost a century. The political materials SNCC developed in Lowndes County illustrate how SNCC’s ideas about Black Power were closely linked to the actual work of organizing around voter registration and political power. They explained voting and politics in direct, straightforward language for people who had been excluded from civic life for almost a century.

How did SNCC utilize comic books to overcome approximately a century of legally-enforced disfranchisement and widespread literacy problems to encourage political engagement?

How did SNCC illustrate the importance of registering, voting, and electing candidates who would be responsive to the Black community’s concerns?

How might you create teaching materials for an issue important to you and your community? What issue(s) would you focus on? What cultural touchstones might work? What artistic approach do you think would be effective in encouraging your neighbors to organize politically?

Listen to Jennifer Lawson and Courtland Cox discuss the ways SNCC organized the LCFP, how the Black Panther was chosen to represent the party, and how they worked together to create other political education materials.
ALL those kind of messes...

So I decided to get into that mess
I didn't want to travel to the courthouse by myself.

Reverend, let's go down to register.

That's not the Lord's work.

I asked the preacher to come go with me.

Teacher, will you go with me to register?

No, I'll lose my job.

I asked the teacher to go with me.

Sam, come go with me to register.

No! You know I live on Mr. John's place.

I asked the farmer to go with me.

Brother, will you go with me to register?

Boy! You gonna get killed messing with that white folks business!

I asked my brother to go....

I had to go by myself.
we came by twos
at first...

then we came by
TENS

THEN WE CAME BY
HUNDREDS..

the white folks threatened us

After we got in that mess some
of us got kicked off the land.

But we were SICK and TIRED
of being SICK and TIRED!

Soon we had the majority
of voters in the county.
We had meetings to talk about what we were going to do with the vote.

Some of us wanted to be Democrats...

The Democrats are the same folks that kept us out and down all these years!

I think we should be Democrats.

We want to decide who's on the board of education, who's tax assessor.

We want something of our own.

But most of us wanted something we could control.

Now we have the vote, we want to control it!!

May 3rd

I nominate Mr. Blackman for sheriff.

We held a mass meeting to nominate our candidates for the Nov. 8th election.

Lowndes County Freedom Organization
One Man
One Vote

A vote for Mr. Blackman is a vote for us.
In mid-June 1966, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) called for Black Power during a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, where SNCC had been organizing since summer 1962. When the crowd roared back their approval, the country took notice and it wasn’t all positive. Many politicians and reporters attacked SNCC, claiming that Black Power was anti-white, violent, and reverse racism. For SNCC, though, the voter registration that had been at the heart of their work since summer 1961 was always about building political power as a mechanism for self-determination and improving the lives of African Americans. Amzie Moore, a World War II veteran and NAACP leader, planted that seed in summer 1960 when he asked Bob Moses for SNCC’s help with voter registration in Mississippi, using maps to demonstrate the potential for Black political power. When Tim Jenkins led a push within SNCC to move toward voter registration in summer 1961, he was thinking about the structural issues that couldn’t be easily tackled by nonviolent direct action, such as housing and job segregation, unequal schools, and police brutality. To impact these, Black people would need political power.

During the 1964 Freedom Summer project, SNCC developed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to bypass the state party that was responsible for disfranchisement. They were turned away by the national party. When the 1965 VRA made voting a more widespread reality, SNCC went a step further by organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Party, an independent political party that became known by its Black Panther symbol. The goal was to build power in a county with an 81 percent Black population that had been completely excluded from political participation before the Movement. In May 1966, the LCFP successfully nominated candidates and organized enough voters to be placed on the November ballot. This accomplishment contributed to a change in leadership when SNCC staff elected Stokely Carmichael as the organization’s chair. Since Carmichael’s call for Black Power was widely distorted and misportrayed, he explained its meaning here.

According to Stokely Carmichael, what were the key problems facing African Americans? What barriers did SNCC face when they tried to get Black people to register to vote and join the LCFP? How did SNCC respond?

How does Carmichael define “Black Power”? What does he say about the kind of economics and politics SNCC was calling for when they used the phrase “Black Power”?

How does he critique liberal whites? What role does he say that whites should play?
**Black Power: The Slogan and the Meaning Beyond the Slogan**

An organization which claims to speak for the needs of a community—as does the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—must speak in the tone of that community, not as somebody else’s buffer zone. This is the significance of black power as a slogan. For once, black people are going to use the words they want to use—not just the words whites want to hear. And they will do this no matter how often the press tries to stop the use of the slogan by equating it with racism or separatism.

An organization which claims to be working for the needs of a community—as SNCC does—must work to provide the community with a position of strength from which to make its voice heard. This is the significance of black power beyond the slogan.

BLACK POWER can be clearly defined for those who do not attach the fears of white America to their questions about it. We should begin with the basic fact that black Americans have two problems: they are poor and they are black. All other problems arise from this two-sided reality: lack of education, the so-called apathy of black men. Any program to end racism must address itself to that double reality.

**SNCC’s Historical Experience: Our Efforts to Win Political Power**

ALMOST FROM ITS BEGINNING, SNCC sought to address itself to both conditions with a program aimed at winning political power for impoverished Southern blacks. We had to begin with politics because black Americans are propertyless people in a country where property is valued above all. We had to work for power, because this country does not function by morality, love, and nonviolence, but by power. Thus we determined to win political power with the idea of moving on from there into activity that would have economic effects. With power, the masses could make or participate in making the decisions which govern their destinies, and thus create basic change in their day-to-day-lives.

But if political power seemed to be the key to self-determination, it was also obvious that the key had been thrown down a deep well many years earlier. Disenfranchisement, maintained by racist terror, made it impossible to talk about organizing for political power in 1960. The right to vote had to be won, and SNCC workers devoted their energies to this from 1961 to 1965. They set up voter registration drives in the Deep South. They created pressure for the vote by holding mock elections in Mississippi in 1963 and by helping to establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964. That struggle was eased, though not won, with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. SNCC workers could then address themselves to the question: “Who can we vote for, to have our needs met—how do we make our vote meaningful?” […]

**How to Make Votes Meaningful: Power Bases to Change the Patterns of Oppression**

THIS IS THE SPECIFIC HISTORICAL experience from which SNCC’s call for “black power” emerged on the Mississippi march last July. But the concept of “black power” is not a recent or isolated phenomenon: It has grown out of the ferment of agitation and activity by different people and organizations in many black communities over the years. Our last year of work in Alabama added a new concrete possibility. In Lowndes county, for example, black power will mean that if a
Negro is elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. If a black man is elected tax assessor, he can collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools serving black people—thus advancing the move from political power into the economic arena. In such areas as Lowndes, where black men have a majority, they will attempt to use it to exercise control. This is what they seek: control. Where Negroes lack a majority, black power means proper representation and sharing of control. It means the creation of power bases from which black people can work to change state-wide or nation-wide patterns of oppression through pressure from strength—instead of weakness. Politically, black power means what it has always meant to SNCC: the coming-together of black people to elect representatives and to force those representatives to speak to their needs. It does not mean merely putting black faces into office. A man or woman who is black and from the slums cannot be automatically expected to speak to the needs of black people. Most of the black politicians we see around the country today are not what SNCC means by black power. The power must be that of a community, and emanate from there. [...] 

SNCC cannot spell out the full logistics of self-determination but it can address itself to the problem by helping black communities define their needs, realize their strength, and go into action along a variety of lines which they must choose for themselves. Without knowing all the answers, it can address itself to the basic problem of poverty; to the fact that in Lowndes County, 86 white families own 90% of the land. What are black people in that county going to do for jobs, where are they going to get money? There must be reallocation of land, of money.

“For racism to die...”: Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shaken if black people are to control their lives. The colonies of the U.S.—and this includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south—must be liberated. For a century, this nation has been like an octopus of exploitation, its tentacles stretching from Mississippi and Harlem, to South America, the Middle East, southern Africa, and Vietnam; the form of exploitation varies from area to area but the essential result has been the same—a powerful few have been maintained and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses. This pattern must be broken. As its grip loosens here and there around the world the hopes of black Americans become more realistic. For racism to die, a totally different America must be born. [...] 

**Integration and Poverty: Only Black Power Can Make Integration Relevant** Integration, moreover, speaks to the problem of blackness in a despicable way. As a goal, it has been based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, blacks must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school. This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that “white” is automatically better and “black” is by definition inferior. This is why integration is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy. It allows the nation to focus on a handful of Southern children who get into white schools, at great price, and to ignore the 94% who are left behind in unimproved all-black schools. Such situations will not change until black people have more power—to control their own school boards, in this case. Then Negroes become equal in a way that means something, and integration ceases to be a one-way street. Then integration doesn’t mean draining skills and energies from the ghetto into white neighborhoods; then it can mean white people moving from Beverly Hills into Watts, white people joining the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Then integration becomes relevant. [...]
The White Problem: White Power and the White Cock Party:

White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say: “We’re all human, everybody is really decent, we must forget color.” But color cannot be “forgotten” until its weight is recognized and dealt with. White America will not acknowledge that the ways in which this country sees itself are contradicted by being black—and always have been. Whereas most of the people who have settled this country came here for freedom or for economic opportunity, blacks were brought here to be slaves. When the Lowndes County Freedom Organization chose the black panther as its symbol, it was christened by the press “the Black Panther Party”—but the Alabama Democratic Party, whose symbol is a rooster has never been called the White Cock Party. No one ever talked about “white power” because power in this country is white. All this adds up to more than merely identifying a group phenomenon by some catchy name or adjective. The furor over that black panther reveals the problems that white America has with color and sex; the furor over “black power” reveals how deep racism runs and the great fear which is attached to it. [...]

The Need for Psychological Equality:
The need for psychological equality is the reason why SNCC today believes that blacks must organize in the black community. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea that black people are able to do things themselves. Only they can help create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will provide the basis for political strength. In the past, white allies have furthered white supremacy without the whites involved realizing it—or wanting it, I think. Black people must do things for themselves; they must conduct tutorial programs themselves so that black children can identify with black people. This is one reason Africa has such importance: The reality of black men ruling their own nations gives blacks everywhere a sense of possibility, or power, which they do not now have.

The Vital Jobs for White Allies:

I have said that most liberal whites react to “black power” with the question, What about me? rather than saying: Tell me what you want me to do and I’ll see if I can do it. There are answers to the right question. One of the most disturbing things about almost all white supporters of the movement has been that they are afraid to go into their own communities—which is where the racism exists—and work to get rid of it. They want to run from Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley. They admonish blacks to be nonviolent; let them preach nonviolence in the white community. They come to teach me Negro history, let them go to the suburbs and open up freedom schools for whites. Let them work to stop America’s racist foreign policy; let them press this government to cease supporting the economy of South Africa. [...]

Toward the Spirit of Community:

But our vision is not merely of a society in which all black men have enough to buy the good things of life. When we urge that black money go into black pockets, we mean the communal pocket. We want to see money go back into the community and used to benefit it. We want to see the cooperative concept applied in business and banking. We want to see black ghetto residents demand that an exploiting landlord or storekeeper sell them, at minimal cost, a building or a shop that they will own and improve cooperatively; they can back their demand with a rent strike, or a boycott, and a community so united behind them that no one else will move into the building or buy at the store. The society we seek to build among black people, then, is not a capitalist one. It is a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love prevail. [...]

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In 1988 when SNCC veterans gathered at Trinity College for a combined history conference and reunion, one of the topics they were particularly eager to address was the role of women and gender in the organization’s history. On a panel titled “SNCC Women and the Stirrings of Feminism,” Mary King, Casey Hayden, Jean Wheeler Smith Young, and Joyce Ladner addressed their individual experiences in SNCC and offered insight into the ways SNCC created or allowed opportunities for women to move beyond the gendered stereotypes of the day.

Why was SNCC so receptive to women’s involvement and leadership? The group was composed of young people who were challenging major boundaries at every turn, from those imposed by powerful whites to their parents’ pleas that they stay in school and out of “trouble.” Moreover, the Movement needed workers too much to try to enforce gendered limitations. Perhaps most importantly, Ella Baker influenced the group to ignore traditional stereotypes while looking for and cultivating leaders. As Bernice Johnson Reagon explained, “leaders were defined by their activism. Not their age or their class.” (Reagon, “Borning Struggle,” 22) That applied to gender, too, and women on SNCC’s staff did pretty much anything that needed doing.

Meanwhile, women in the communities where SNCC organized were often the first to step forward and were always central to the organizing. Charles Sherrod called these crucial leaders mamas, describing a typical “mama” as “a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share.” (Sherrod, “On Cucumbers”) Even when everyone else was too afraid to step forward, SNCC could count on movement mamas to provide food, protection, and a place to stay, while encouraging their neighbors to talk to the SNCC workers knocking on their doors.

What do Jean Wheeler Smith Young and Joyce Ladner emphasize about their experiences in SNCC? What types of work did they do?

What do they say about sexism? Did they experience sexism? Why are they frustrated with portrayals of women in SNCC?

What do Young and Ladner say about the community women who were so central to SNCC’s work? Why and how were they so important?
JEAN WHEELER SMITH: I don’t usually get into setting the record straight; I usually don’t worry about the record, but there is this one point on which I have some strong feeling and that is the common notion that women were oppressed in SNCC. I just was not oppressed in SNCC. I wasn’t subordinate, I was high functioning. I did anything I was big enough to do and I got help from everybody around me for any project that I wanted to pursue. And I know we can put shadows to it and so on, but I wanted to strongly make this point and then maybe move to the shadows.

Stokely gave me my first ticket south. I think Stokely respected me. I think his comment about women, the position of women being prone, was humorous; he’s a funny guy, and there was a lot of sex in SNCC. We were twenty years old. What do you expect? I think Stokely respected me and respected the women he was working with at the time. I think he might have wanted to be a successful male chauvinist, but I just don’t think he could have gotten away with it.

I wanted to give you some examples of how I as a woman was very much enabled to function to my highest potential. I’ve heard several references to the death of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner in Mississippi, and I remember that when they were missing and we learned that they were probably dead, we all said, “Well, we have to go to Philadelphia [Mississippi], we can’t let this go by, we can’t appear to be afraid.” And so I guess it was ten or twelve of us decided to go and people volunteered and I was one who volunteered, and nobody ever said, “You’re a girl, you can’t go.” There was just no thought that I couldn’t go at this very stressful time into this dangerous situation because I was a woman.

As I remember it, I did everything everybody else in the project did there. I was scared all the time, but I think they were scared too. I remember that at the end of the time that I was in Philadelphia and the convention organizing had been accomplished, a bus came through. Bob Moses was on the bus and Bob wanted to know, did I want to come up to the convention, to the challenge, and I said, “No, I think my work here is more important than going to the convention.” He said, “Fine,” he got back on the bus, and I stayed in Philadelphia.

I just had so much freedom to decide how I was going to work and so much support for my decisions that I never ever felt this sense of limitation that people seem to be referring to. [...] People had titles, but the titles didn’t matter. And especially they didn’t matter when you were in Mississippi by yourself and there was some sheriff coming toward you with his gun drawn. The title of you or the guy next to you had no significance.

I wanted to say something about the female role models that I had in SNCC. Again, I think that the examples before me were of strong black women functioning at their potential. [...] The money didn’t make any difference. The title, as I remember it, didn’t make any difference. So I saw Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Hamer, Miss Baker as part of the group. And they were great role models for me. I still remember Miss Baker monitoring our activity, making sure we were thinking straight, making sure that we were looking at the economic side of things, making sure that this process of arriving at consensus was one that we were carefully sticking to and that everybody was participating in the decision making. She was so powerful that actually I really wasn’t even that friendly with her, but she was definitely a woman who was functioning at her highest potential.

Mrs. Johnson—I remember in particular, June, that your father stayed home and took care of the children while she went to jail. I remember very clearly, I was staying in Mrs. Johnson’s house,
and I had a place on the bed and June’s father was on the floor sleeping to accommodate us SNCC workers, and I just can’t see that that was a male-dominated chauvinist situation there. I think that throughout our relationships and our working at least until 1965, that that just wasn’t the case.

And I remember Martha Norman and I were working for Sherrod in Albany and he wanted to keep us and protect us, and we didn’t want to stay there; we thought that Greenwood was a much more sexy place to be, much more exciting and dramatic and powerful, so we waited for Sherrod to go to jail, and as soon as he went to jail, we left at midnight to go and work where we wanted to work in Greenwood, which was much more powerful and dramatic.

I wanted to give some other examples of powerful younger women in the group. Ruby Doris Robinson everybody had incredible respect for. Ruby was executive secretary for a while, but she seemed to run the place as far as I know. My memory is that one day I was sitting around the office in Atlanta. I think I was drinking Cokes and flirting or something, and Ruby came over to me and said, “Get up and go get your license If you want to go”—I wanted to go to some project—“you can’t expect someone’s going to drive you there,” so it was Ruby who made me go get a license. I remember Annie Pearl Avery, she was a gun-toting cab driver, just completely independent, and functioning in what you would consider to be a typical male role, if you wanted to call it that. […]

My sense was that although admittedly the administrative structure on paper was men, the women had access to whatever resources and decision making that they needed to have or wanted to have, and I don’t remember being impeded in this. […] We were creating a trusting and loving atmosphere and a supportive atmosphere; we transmitted the expectation that change was possible, people were going to get better. We let the person lead. We let the person we were trying to organize, lead. We let him express what was important to him and then we followed. And having let him lead, we then did two things: we’d point out the contradictions; that is, you say “You want this and this, they don’t go together; could you look at this another way?” And then we would offer an alternative solution to the solution the person we were trying to organize had historically operated on. That is the way that I understood what I was doing when I was there. […]

JOYCE LADNER: It was soon after the Freedom Rides, in the early fall, that I began to meet some of the young women and men who were my kind of people. I began to meet people like Diane Nash, later Ruby Doris, and all the other people. And the most important thing was I began to meet local Mississippi people who had grown up feeling as stifled as I, who had grown up feeling that they had ideas they wanted to express and that they couldn’t. To have things they wanted to do with their lives and to feel totally constrained is a horrible feeling. When I began to meet other people throughout the state who felt that, who were brought up the same way, it was like I’d died and gone to heaven, to meet people like Susan Ruffin who had lived on like $27—and Mrs. Hamer and all these other people, and to meet Guyot out at Tougaloo, was just an extraordinary experience.

None of these women I began to meet knew they were oppressed because of their gender; no one had ever told them that. They were like my mother, and they’d been reared in the tradition of my mother and my mother’s five sisters. They had grown up in a culture where they had had the opportunity to use all of their skills and all of their talents to fight racial and class oppression, more racial than anything else. They took their sexuality for granted, for it was not as problematic to them as their race and their poverty. And perhaps they didn’t know they were oppressed because
of their gender, they were so busy trying to survive and to fight day to day. It would have been a luxury for my mother to focus on gender concerns. It would never have occurred to her; neither would it have occurred to me at that time because it was not a problem, it was never problematic.

We assumed we were equal. When we got into SNCC I would have been ready to fight some guy if he said, “You can’t do this because you’re a woman.” I would have said, “What the hell are you talking about?” A lot of women in SNCC were very, very tough and independent minded. In fact, the most independent-minded people you’ll ever meet were in SNCC, men and women. They would argue with a signpost. If you were weak and didn’t have really strong and firm beliefs about whatever it is you thought you believed in, you didn’t survive. You couldn’t survive. It was one of the most hostile cultures in which you were trying to operate, the external culture. You were trying to operate against a perceived common foe and that common foe was what kept us so tightly knit together, as Casey has so eloquently put it. Our enemy was always an external one. It was not internal, at least not through those early years, and I think we do have to make a division between pre-1964 and post-1964. There were very, very different kinds of ideas and ideologies and values and so on that operated then.

But for many of us, I think, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to use our skills in an egalitarian way without any kind of subjugation because of our race or our class or our gender. [...] Sure there were no women who ever chaired SNCC, but I bet you ten to one Ruby Doris dominated SNCC. We’d have a little joke, is it Jim running SNCC or Ruby Doris? I mean, what was a chairman? Who cared? Nobody really even cared. People at SNCC were so antiauthoritarian that if they thought you were going to begin to emerge, they’d bring you back down, grab you and snatch you down. Some of the biggest jokes were made about Stokely, Stokely Starmichael, who does he think he is? But those same people, we still embrace him and love him very much. It was not a hostile, nasty comment at all, but it was just that we were very, very antiauthoritarian.

The point I’m trying to make is the context of time is very, very critical. And that for many of us, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to really use our potential, to use our abilities, and to express our views on the world, the state of the world. We assumed we were equal. We were treated that way. Most people who came into SNCC were more independent-minded than most people in the rest of the country; most people on the outside. The fainthearted didn’t last. Our relationships were defined, like I said, first and foremost by the task at hand. Matters of life and death were abundant, especially in some of the tough times in Mississippi. [...] 

A final point I’ll make here is that SNCC challenged authority of all kinds. It’s not coincidental that people like Victoria Gray (who is my cousin) talked about having challenged authority as a child. I think all of us did. And what we used in SNCC were kind of shock trooper tactics. What I think that the analysts, the scholars, have gotten wrong, and other popular writers have gotten wrong, is that they say that feminism emerged because of dissension within the ranks. Rather, feminism is an outgrowth; it emerged because SNCC served as a model, a prototype of what could become a better kind of society. It gave rise to not only a feminist consciousness but other groups like gay people, the elderly, students, a whole range of people within the society who had also been oppressed. They began to use the SNCC model to pattern their own movements. [...]
In 1965, Jane Stembridge, a white southerner and SNCC’s first paid staffer, transcribed a class led by Stokely Carmichael at a “Work-Study Institute” held by SNCC in Waveland, Mississippi. By this time, Carmichael was one of SNCC’s most experienced field secretaries—a veteran of the freedom rides who had spent time in the notorious Parchman Penitentiary and an extraordinary organizer. In June 1966 during the Meredith March Against Fear he would capture the nation’s attention with his call for Black Power. But in this class, before the widespread press coverage made him a household name, Carmichael demonstrated the best of SNCC’s approach to teaching through a lesson on two versions of English. Instead of lecturing, he posed a series of questions, asking students to compare what many would call standard English with the language they were likely to hear at home in their community, sometimes called Black English.

In the process, they raised and answered for themselves questions about the role of language and how some things, including language, are given value, often by those from the dominant culture. At the heart of this lesson, Carmichael was asking the students to consider the questions that framed SNCC’s 1964 Freedom Schools Citizenship Curriculum: “1. What does the majority culture have that we want? 2. What does the majority culture have that we don’t want? 3. What do we have that we want to keep?” (Payne, I’ve Got the Light, 303)

Bob Moses observed that the Movement helped provide credentials for people who had little opportunity for formal education. It also upended many assumptions about what was—or should be—valued, bringing to the fore the learned wisdom of many who had previously been denied formal education or leadership roles.

**How does Carmichael open the discussion? How do the students initially respond?**

**What is the range in the students’ thinking? How does Carmichael help them consider and rethink assumptions about language and what is “proper”?**

**How does Stembridge compare Carmichael’s session with Zinn’s? What does this suggest about SNCC’s approach to freedom teaching compared with traditional academic teaching?**

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The most important class was "stokeley's speech class." He put eight sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

| I digs wine | I enjoy drinking cocktails |
| The peoples wants freedom | The people want freedom |
| The peoples wants freedom | The people want freedom |
| Whereinsoever the policemen goes they causes troubles | Anywhere the officers of the law go, they cause trouble |
| I wants to reddish to vote | I want to register to vote |

Stokeley: What do you think about these sentences? Such as -- The peoples wants freedom?
Zelma: It doesn't sound right.
Stokeley: What do you mean?
Zelma: "Peoples" isn't right.
Stokeley: Does it mean anything?
Milton: People mean everybody. Peoples means everybody in the world.
Alma: Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.
Henry: They're both okay, but in a speech class you have to use correct English.

(Stokeley writes "correct English" in corner of blackboard.)

Zelma: I was taught to use the sentences on the right side.
Stokeley: Does anybody you know use the sentences on the left?
Class: Yes.
Stokeley: Are they wrong?
Zelma: In terms of English they are wrong.
Stokeley: Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?
Stokeley: You all say some people speak like on the left side of the board. Could they go anywhere and speak that way? Could they go to Harvard?
Class: Yes - No. Disagreement.
Stokeley: Does Mr. Turnbow speak like on the left side?
Class: Yes.
Stokeley: Could Mr. Turnbow go to Harvard and speak like that? I wants to reddish to vote.
Class: Yes.
Stokeley: Would he be embarrassed?
Class: Yes...No!
Zelma: He wouldn't be, but I would. It doesn't sound right.
Stokeley: Suppose someone from Harvard came to Holmes County and said, "I want to register to vote." Would they be embarrassed?
Zelma: No.
Stokeley: Is it embarrassing at Harvard but not in Holmes County? The way you speak?
Milton: It's inherited. It's depending on where you come from. The people at Harvard would understand.
Stokeley: Do you think the people at Harvard should forgive you?
Milton: The people at Harvard should help teach us correct English.
Alma: Why should we change if we understand what we mean?
Shirley: It is embarrassing.
Stokeley: Which way do most people talk?
Class: Like on the left.

(He asks each student. All but two say "left." One says that southerners speak
like on the left, northerners on the right. Another said that southerners speak on the left, but the majority of people speak like on the right.)

Stokeley: Which way do television and radio people speak?
Class: Left.

(There was a distinction made by the class between northern commentators and local programs. Most programs were local and spoke like on the left, they said.)

Stokeley: Which way do teachers speak?
Class: On the left, except in class.
Stokeley: If most people speak on the left, why are they trying to change these people?
Gladys: If you don't talk right, society rejects you. It embarrasses other people if you don't talk right.
Hank: But Mississippi society, ours, isn't embarrassed by it.
Shirley: But the middle class wouldn't class us with them.
Hank: They won't accept "reddish." What is reddish? It's Negro dialect and it's something you eat.
Stokeley: Will society reject you if you don't speak like on the right side of the board? Gladys says society would reject you.
Gladys: You might as well face it, man! What we gotta do is go out and become middle class. If you can't speak good English, you don't have a car, a job, or anything.
Stokeley: If society rejects you because you don't speak good English, should you learn to speak good English?
Class: No!
Alma: I'm tired of doing what society say. Let society say "reddish" for a while. People ought to just accept each other.
Zelma: I think we should be speaking just like we always have.
Alma: If I change for society, I wouldn't be free anyway.
Ernestine: I'd like to learn correct English for my own sake.
Shirley: I would too.
Alma: If the majority speaks on the left, then a minority must rule society. Why do we have to change to be accepted by the minority group?
Stokeley: Let's think about two questions for next time: What is society? Who makes the rules for society?

The class lasted a little more than an hour. It moved very quickly. It was very good. That is, people learned. I think they learned because:

--people learn from someone they trust, who trusts them. This trust included Stokeley's self-trust and trust, or seriousness, about the subject matter.
--people learn more and more quickly from induction rather than deduction.
--people learn when they themselves can make the connection between ideas; can move from here to there.
--people learn when learning situations emphasize and develop one single idea -- which is very important to them personally.
--people learn when they can see what they are talking about. He used the board.

Among other things they learned these. That is, they themselves concluded:

--there is something called "correct English" and something called "incorrect English."
--it is not embarrassing to these people themselves.
--it is made embarrassing by other people.
--because it is embarrassing to them.
--they are a minority, the people who use correct English.
--they decide what is correct English.

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they make that important and use it to shame people and keep them out of society.
they make requirements for jobs and acceptance.
they decide who is acceptable to society.
—by shame.
—but not everybody can be shamed.
—not Mr. Turnbow, for example.
the main thing is to understand what people mean when they talk.
—that is not the main thing to society.

I recorded the whole class because it is a whole thing—one thing. That is why people learned. At least, that is why I did.

I think the best way to write about Waveland is to tell about that class. Because that was what the Waveland Institute was about. Some other classes were good, and some were bad. Vicki Levy and Phyllis Cunningham came and we all talked about sex. That was good because what we talked about was important and Vicki was free to talk about it freely, as was most of the class. No one seemed to assume that sex was anything but great. Hurray!

Jeanette's class was good when the kids got to talk freely about the Atlanta staff meeting and they had plenty that needed to get out...and needs to be heard. My class was good because I talked about myself and my hang-ups, which made them able to do that — or begin to. About shame. About fear of shame. About guilt. Morty's class in math was good, I hear, because he is very dynamic and because the kids were tired of words by that time. Carole Merritt was good when she talked, but she had to handle administration and, in the case of guest speakers, retreat. She should teach.

Audio-visual was good because it is better to see things. The kids didn't like to see films about poverty and hunger. They liked story movies. They liked Casey and Mary and Emmie's filmstrip on PDP. I liked Viva Zapata. So did they.

The opposite of Stokely's class was Zinn's. He started with three words on the board: Freedom, Education, Power. It took a long time to kind of start over with specifics. He also had way too much material and lectured too much. He had a lot to give and he wanted to, but he wasted himself. I did that too. We didn't know. I think we learned a lot.

I don't want to make conclusions or proposals. I think Stokely's class can stand on its own. Not only that, I think it is better than anything I could say. Just two things: he spoke to where they were at, and they were at different places, and the places changed during the movement of the discussion. Secondly, he trusted them and he trusted himself...and they trusted him.

I think the primary hang-up was not the staff's lack of knowledge or concern, but the lack of freedom to put it across. Self-trust. Self-love or something like that. I think we have to be pretty damn free to teach anyway. Or to learn?
In this interview with the *Eyes on the Prize* production team, Bernice Johnson Reagon, a SNCC veteran who wrote a dissertation about music in the movement, discusses the many ways singing was at the heart of the Movement. People sang to overcome fear, to build unity, to energize meetings, to articulate demands, and to talk back to the white supremacists who ran and terrorized their communities. Reagon and others often started with traditional sacred songs, sometimes creating new lyrics for the situation, but the Movement also drew on popular songs—many SNCC workers were teenagers!—or wrote original pieces to commemorate aspects of the Movement. The singing in Albany, Georgia, Reagon’s hometown, was so powerful and compelling that it inspired SNCC to create the Freedom Singers.

Among other things, Reagon points out that the Movement should be understood as being about more than just the obvious concrete goals, like desegregating public spaces or securing the right to vote. For many people, it was personally transformative. Reagon recalls that the Movement gave her “the power to challenge any line that limits me.” She added that it “just really gave me a real chance to fight and to struggle and not respect boundaries that put me down.” (Reagon, “Borning Struggle,” 22) Singing gave Reagon and others the courage to act, and its power represented the larger feelings of transformation that came with the Movement.

What does Bernice Johnson Reagon say about the importance and role of singing?

What does Reagon emphasize as being important about the Movement? How did the Movement impact her as a person?

What does Reagon say about the relationship between singing and going to jail? Why was that relationship important? Why were white supremacists so angered by movement singing?

In this excerpt from a 1988 presentation at Trinity College, Reagon led several songs and played a clip from the movement that illustrated the power of the movement singing. She explained that people who were risking their lives couldn’t worry about what their voices sounded like; they had to sing at full power to feel and show their strength.
Bernice Johnson Reagon: I know a lot of people talk about it being a movement and when they do a movement they’re talking about buses and jobs and the ICC ruling, and the Trailways bus station. Those things were just incidents that gave us an excuse to be something of ourselves. It’s almost like where we had been working before we had a chance to do that stuff was in a certain kind of space, and when we did those marches and went to jail, we expanded the space we could operate in, and that was echoed in the singing. It was a bigger, more powerful singing.[…]

I like people to know when they deal with the movement that there are these specific things, but there is a transformation that took place inside of the people that needs to also be quantified in the picture. And the singing is just the echo of that. If you have a people who are transformed and they create the sound that lets you know they are new people, then certainly you’ve never heard it before. They have also never heard it before, because they’ve never been that before.

When I was in the mass meetings, I would be part of a group up at the front leading the songs. There would be Rutha Harris, Andrew Reed, Charlie Jones, Cordell Reagon, Charles Sherrod. We were all young people. The meetings always started with these freedom songs and the freedom songs were in-between all of the activities of the mass meetings. Most of the mass meeting was singing—there was more singing than there was talking. Most of the work that was done in terms of taking care of movement business had to do with nurturing the people who had come, and there would be two or three people who would talk but basically songs were the bed of everything. I’d had songs in college and high school and church, but in the movement all the words sounded differently. “This Little Light of Mine, I’m Going to Let It Shine,” which I’d sung all my life, said something very different: “All in the street, I’m going to let it shine.” I’d never even heard that before, ‘cause, I mean, who would go into the street? That was not where you were supposed to be if you were an upstanding Christian person. “All in the jailhouse, I’m going to let it shine”—all of these new concepts of where, if you said it, this is where you could be.

What I can remember is being very alive and very clear, the clearest I’ve ever been in my life. I knew that every minute, I was doing what I was supposed to do. That was the way it was in jail, too, and on the marches. In “We Shall Overcome” there’s a verse that says “God is on our side,” and there was a theological discussion that said maybe we should say, “We are on God’s side.” God was lucky to have us in Albany doing what we were doing. I mean, what better case would he have? So it was really like God would be very, very happy to be on my side. There’s a bit of arrogance about that, but that was the way it felt.

I think Albany settled the issue of jail and I think songs helped to do that because in the songs you could just name the people who were trying to use this against you—Asa Kelley, who was the mayor, Chief Pritchett, who was the police. This behavior is new behavior for black people in the United States of America. You would every once in a while have a crazy black person going up against some white person and they would hang him. But this time, with a song, there was nothing they could do to block what we were saying. Not only did you call their names and say what you wanted to say, but they could not stop your sound. Singing is different than talking because no matter what they do, they would have to kill me to stop me from singing, if they were arresting me. Sometimes they would plead and say, “Please stop singing.” And you would just know that your word is being heard. There was a real sense of platformness and clearly empowerment, and it was just like saying, “Put me in jail, that’s not an issue of power. My freedom has nothing to do with putting me in jail.” And so there was this joy.
While singing was central to every aspect of the Movement, SNCC engaged with local culture and expanded on it in many ways. The Free Southern Theater (FST) was one of the most visible and ambitious cultural outgrowths of the Movement. Founded by three SNCC staffers with experience and interest in theater, the FST made its debut during Freedom Summer when the group toured Mississippi and several other states putting on performances of three plays—"In White America" by Martin Duberman, “The Rifles of Senora Carrar” by Bertolt Brecht, and “Shadow of a Gunman” by Sean O’Casey, all of which featured themes of oppression and struggles for freedom. In addition to introducing the cast and others involved in making the theater a reality, the Free Southern Theater’s program further encouraged community engagement by providing questions to facilitate discussion after the performances. The FST also invited the audience to attend practices and insisted that community members had both the need and capacity to write and perform their own plays.

What do the founders of the Free Southern Theater say about their goals and purpose?

What motivated them to form a free theater to travel the rural South and perform for predominantly movement-related audiences?

What do they say about the importance of live theater, beyond entertainment?
PURPOSE

It is no secret. One half of the people in the South are oppressed economically, politically, and culturally by the other half. The Free Southern Theater exists to inspire and uplift those oppressed people. For those who are slapped in the face by ignorance from newspapers and other mass media because of their color or because of their beliefs, the Free Southern Theater exists for them as a mirror for their beliefs and as a reflection of their colors. Those who are denied the possibilities of theater as a form of expression; those who thought they would never get a chance to act, write, sing, or dance on stage—The Free Southern Theater exists for them.

All of our performances are free of charge. If theater can place before us certain emotions and ideas found in all of us, then the value of these ideas should be shared by all of us, not only by those who can afford to pay for it.

We tour six Southern states, staging plays wherever there is room for actors, lights, and an audience.

To encourage the growth not only of our own professional theater, but of community theater as well, we have organized community workshops in New Orleans. Planting the seeds of active participation in every community we visit is necessary. Why? Ask yourself this question: "How many plays written express what I have lived through, or what I am experiencing now?" You may find the answer to be: "Not very many." You must write and stage your own.

For this season we have chosen three plays about revolt—that sometimes bloody struggle to organize grievances for effective political change and action. We will not limit ourselves to these plays however, and will rehearse others, funny and serious, while on tour.

You are welcome to watch our rehearsals, see our performances, participate in our workshops, discuss in our discussions; to help us make theater a part of this society, and a part of all our lives.
In early August 1964, delegates from more than 40 freedom schools gathered in Meridian, Mississippi, for the Mississippi Freedom School Convention. While there, they created a platform laying out the issues they believed were important for their future and for our country. Some of the issues remain important today and are worth revisiting. The young delegates tackled everything from international issues to the role of the federal government, strategies for movement activism, the role of law enforcement, civil liberties issues, housing, public accommodations and much more. This excerpt, which focuses on education and health care, gives us a starting place for thinking about what has and hasn’t changed over time, and for thinking about the work we still need to do in order to “create a more perfect union.”

Looking at the issues the students identified for education and health care, how many of these do you believe have been addressed since they met?

What issues remain from their list? What would you add today to their list in terms of education and health care for you and your community?

What issues would you add to the platform? You can consider things the students identified—such as law enforcement, housing, civil liberties, the role of the federal government, international relations, job discrimination—or other concerns important to you.
In her 1988 comments on the “SNCC Women and the Stirrings of Feminism” panel, Joyce Ladner went beyond addressing her experiences as a woman in SNCC, to raise questions about the issues of the day. She says, “I’m not content to sit here and talk about what was.” She asks those gathered what they could learn “from that period that could work today when we see black people and poor people of all races have sunk to new depths.” What, she asks, could be done to inspire people to organize and tackle “some of the thorniest problems this society has ever faced.” (Ladner in *Circle of Trust*, 145) She concluded by asking “How can we infuse the current generation of young people, young activists, with a sense of purpose and with some of our hope that we still maintain after two decades?”

We are asking similar questions today.

What can we learn from SNCC’s history that expands our knowledge of the past and helps us address the issues we face today?

How have your perceptions of the Movement changed since learning about SNCC’s history?

What issues are important to you? What have you learned from this history that might help you work with friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc. to create a “more perfect union” or a “more just, inclusive, and sustainable society”? (NEH, A More Perfect Union Initiative)

Want to learn more? Go to websites for: the SNCC Digital Gateway (SNCCDigital.org), the SNCC Legacy Project (SNCCLegacyProject.org), and the Civil Rights Movement Veterans Archive (CRMVet.org).


Cox, Courtland. Comments at founding meeting for Movement History Initiative, Duke University, Nov. 2013, notes in Emilye Crosby’s possession. For more information about the Movement History Initiative, see https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/franklin/movement-history-initiative.


Sherrod, Charles, Position Paper #13, Waveland, Mississippi, [6-12 November 1964], Elaine DeLott Baker Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.


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Visit the SNCC Legacy Project website and learn more about the digital movement platform.