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HUMANITIES WITH A BLACK FOCUS: MARGARET WALKER ALEXANDER
AND THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY, LIFE, AND CULTURE OF
BLACK PEOPLE, 1968-1979

by

THERON WILKERSON

Under the Direction of Maurice Hobson, PhD

ABSTRACT

In 1968, Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, professor of English at Jackson State College, founded a Black Studies Institute in Jackson, Mississippi. This study is an intellectual, institutional and social movement history that utilizes archival research and textual analysis of Alexander's writings, poetry, and work as teacher and director of the Institute in the context of the Black Campus Movement (BCM) and Black Freedom Struggle. It pushes the boundaries of historiographical scholarship on BCM that overshadows the epistemological and aesthetic politics of women faculty-activists who ushered forth racialized and gendered analysis as well as developed the foundations of Black Studies.

INDEX WORDS: Black Studies, Margaret Walker Alexander, Intellectual History, Critical Pedagogy, Black Campus Movement, Scholar-Activism

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THERON WILKERSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

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Theron Wilkerson
2017

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INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY, LIFE, AND CULTURE OF BLACK
PEOPLE, 1986-1979

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2017

DEDICATION

For Malissa, my mother, who gave me reading and resilience,

For S. Mace, my friend, who showed me how to give myself to service and live,

For Nigel, my brother, who allows me to love with my whole heart and soul,

Thank you.

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God bless my parents who are my rock and my safety, to whom I drive three hundred miles towards when all around me gets hazy. I would not be here, in Atlanta, if it were not for you believing in the little boy who is a poet and a teacher. I know how proud you are to have a son that is “so smart.” Mark Henderson, thank you for pulling the creative spirit out of me and making room in your family, our MADDRAMA family, for me to learn what it means to be a historian, a friend, and an artist. Noel Didla, I speak your name, my mother in Jackson, my comrade, and lover of love, truth, freedom and food. Angela Stewart and Robert Luckett, who are only an email away, who both keep the legacy of Margaret Walker alive, well, and dynamic. Mickey Nixon, my creator in crime, who at every stroke of my pen, has made himself available for performances and demanded that I soak, rinse and wrangle new material out of myself. Marcus Haynes, my friend and roommate, who loves the study of Black people, laughing with Black people, teaching Black people, and pushing the boundaries of Blackness to save all of us, thank you for your room, your conversations, your encouragement, and your very justified emotional involvement.

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I would also like to take this time to give a special shout out to the Center for Undergraduate Research at Jackson State University for providing the first space for my fellow

undergraduate cohorts and me to engage in this research venture. Because of their support, we were able to attend at three conferences to present our research, one of them was the annual Center for Undergraduate Research symposium. As an added benefit, Dr. Chapman was able to secure more funds to hire a graduate research assistant, Darius Caleb Smith, who engaged in similar research on Margaret Walker Alexander. He has been a treasure to write with, and his chapter “A Feminine Touch to Black Studies” set the stage for understanding Alexander’s role in bringing Black Studies to Jackson State College. I thank him for our earlier talks on the history of Black Studies and the Black Campus Movement and all of the future work that we will engage in as scholars.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLACK CAMPUS MOVEMENT	BCM
BLACK POWER MOVEMENT	BPM
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT	CRM
CONGRESS OF RACIAL EQUALITY	CORE
JACKSON STATE COLLEGE	JSC
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY	JSU
STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION	SGA
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE	SNCC

1 INTRODUCTION

*“Time to wipe away the slime
from inner rooms of thinking,
and covert skin of suffering...”*

—Margaret Walker Alexander, “Now”

“Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born.”

—Margaret Walker Alexander, “For My People”

In 1968 Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, renowned poet, novelist, and professor of English at Jackson State College, founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life and Culture of Black People (will also be referred to as the Black Studies Institute and/or the Institute) to address “problems of identity and alienation within the individual toward the goal of widening the circle of understanding, upgrading his self-concept, and preparing him for greater service to his community.”¹ Within the first ten years this Black Studies program was responsible for redesigning the core curriculum so that students could substitute Black Studies courses with general courses, for attempting to create majors and minors in Black Studies, and for hosting workshops, lectures and conferences that were free and open to the public.² Born July 7, 1915 in Birmingham, Alabama, Alexander went on to earn an undergraduate degree at Northwestern and both her master’s and doctorate degrees from University of Iowa. In 1949, Alexander, along with her husband, Firnist James Alexander, and three children, moved to Mississippi to accept a position as professor in the English department at Jackson State College

¹ Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 15 July 1968. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

² Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 17 April 1968; Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 5 July 1968. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

(JSC), twelve years after receiving the Yale University Younger Poets Award for her poem “For My People” seven years earlier.³ While a professor at JSC, Alexander was granted a sabbatical to pursue a doctorate degree at University of Iowa where she completed her neo-slave novel, *Jubilee*, as her dissertation project two years before founding the Black Studies Institute.

Alexander’s formative years prepared her for a life in education and the arts. Alexander was deeply rooted in the Black Academy, a space where Black scholars fought for autonomy from liberal and conservative whites, but also where they were able to discuss ideas of political and economic sustainability.⁴ Alexander’s father, Reverend Sigismund Walker, was originally from Jamaica and came to the United States in 1908.⁵ Sigismund studied at Tuskegee Institute with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver and then transferred to Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta to become a minister. After graduating, Sigismund was hired as a pastor in Florida where he met Marion Dozier, Alexander’s mother. After Alexander was born in 1915, Sigismund and Marion were both hired to teach at Haven Institute in Meridian, Mississippi. By the time Alexander was ten years old, both of her parents became professors at New Orleans University, now the historically Black Dillard University. Soon afterwards, Alexander was given her first datebook in which she recorded her poetry from her father where she created and curated nearly three hundred poems. Including cultivating her poetic license, Alexander also fashioned her intellectual and artistic journey through assisting her father with the development of his sermons and participating in her mother’s music lessons. Coming of age in this spiritually rooted, educationally positive, and artistically supportive household provided

³ Carolyn Brown, *Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014): 53.

⁴ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988): 79.

⁵ Brown, *Song of My Life*, 6-8; Carolyn Brown details Alexander’s parents’ biography in her study of Alexander.

Alexander the springboard for engaging an educational career in literary studies; however, her encounters with Black Marxist literary artist Richard Wright in Chicago and their work at the Works Progress Administration and the South Side Writer's Project allowed Alexander the opportunity to discuss ideas around race and class, among other social issues. While Margaret Walker Alexander came of age during the Harlem Renaissance, she is more properly placed during the Chicago Renaissance, during the era of social protest poetry. Further, Alexander befriended notable civil rights activists in Jackson, Mississippi, like Medgar Evers who she memorialized in a poem, as well as friendships with leading Black scholars and artists. This, along with her close observation of political and social movements impacted her educational philosophy and practice.

1.1 Purpose

While Alexander's biographical history details of a rich intellectual foregrounding in the Black Studies tradition, her time as founder and director of the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People, which she founded in 1968 and retired from in 1979, provides a locus for investigating this Institute within the context of the Black Campus Movement. Coined by Ibram Kendi (formerly known as Ibram Rogers) in *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*, the Black Campus Movement has described a movement led predominately by Black students throughout the nation from 1965-1972 in order to challenge and transform American higher education institutions at both historically white and Black colleges and universities.⁶ The Black Campus Movement encompassed student activists who had roots in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. These students mobilized to demand campus alterations beyond the unilateral

⁶ Ibram Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

formation of Black Studies programs, particularly by challenging the racist and accommodationist higher education policies and practices. As an arc of the Black Power Movement, defined by its rejection of the gradualism that many activists believed characterized the Civil Rights movement, students of the Black Campus Movement held more Black-power oriented protests on college campuses from 1965-1975, than at any other locale in American society.⁷ Black youth, in historical scholarship, are defined as the ideological leaders of the Black Freedom Struggle, and they effectively changed the dynamics of campus culture and politics by demanding and forming Black Studies departments, programs, and institutes; the creation of cultural centers dedicated to Black culture; the hiring and recruitment of Black faculty, coaches, staff, and students; and the formation of Black Student Unions along with other legacies that still last today.⁸

The purpose of this study is to expand the dimensions of the Black Campus Movement as a social movement led by students, particularly by revisiting the role of Black faculty. This study is an intellectual, institutional, and social movement history that utilizes archival research and textual analysis of Alexander's writings, poetry, and work as teacher and director of the Institute in the context of the Black Campus Movement and Black Freedom Struggle. This study pushes the boundaries of historiographical scholarship on BCM that overshadows the epistemological and aesthetic politics of women faculty-activists who ushered forth racialized and gendered analysis as well as developed the foundations of Black Studies. Faculty, like Margaret Walker Alexander, also had stake in transforming campus and in using the state college/university space as a counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool. Educators, like Alexander, saw education as a political

⁷ Ibram Kendi, "The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement," *The Journal of Social History* 42, no. 1 (Fall 2008):

⁸ *Ibid*, 175-182.

endeavor, and therefore, sought to repurpose the campus as movement centers. Also, this study addresses the masculinist foundations of Black Studies. As a Black woman faculty member and poet, Alexander's poetic, pedagogical, and institutional aspirations began to develop the elements of a Black feminist/womanist consciousness. Ironically, Alice Walker critiqued Alexander for treating Black women writers like "footnotes" while she was auditing one of Alexander's Black literature classes.⁹ While there are contradictions in Alexander's Black feminist pedagogical beginnings, she struggled with, imagined, created space for, supported, and organized a Black feminist event with leading Black women scholars and artists in Black Studies and began the work of curating a history of Black women literary artists is evidence that Black Studies has Black feminist foundations.

1.1.1 Significance of the Study

The formation of the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People at Jackson State College by Margaret Walker Alexander in 1968 situates it in the middle of Kendi's Black Campus Movement; however, it fails to hold up to several of the tenants of Kendi's definition of the movement. Alexander used her position as a faculty activist and scholar in order to create a Black Studies Institute at Jackson State College. Nevertheless, this scholarship does not argue that Alexander's Institute was formed without influences from the national student protests and student rebellion on campuses. However, while there were student rebellions on Jackson State's campus, much of it was in response to racial hostility and police suppression. Margaret Walker Alexander had many reasons why she engaged in the endeavor of starting a Black Studies program. First and foremost, she came from a tradition of Black higher education; both of her parents taught at the historically Black New Orleans University. Second,

⁹ Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and Partisan View," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983): 84.

she was intimately involved in the Black literary scene and called many of the Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance friends. She located her literary aesthetic with a post-New Negro social protest aesthetic that was informed by the Great Depression and the socio-political response to it, the longer history of race and class in America, and the global struggle against empire and oppression.¹⁰ She also had experience with program and course design, having developed a humanities program which she says “raised the cultural level 75 percent but also provided credits on race in the modern world.”¹¹ After the assassination of her friend and neighbor, Medgar Evers, and the massive student uprisings at Jackson State College, Alexander was put in a position to reconsider the politics of her own poetry and teaching. Her ideology in her aesthetics and pedagogy took a more confrontational, Black nationalist orientation. Surely, this Institute as well as other campus alterations were the result of university leaders’ critical observation of national movements. When President John A. Peoples approached Alexander with the idea to form a “scholarly, comprehensive program covering history, music, art, politics, literature, and culture,” she autonomously expounded on it to develop a rigorous Black Studies program at Jackson State College.¹²

Furthermore, while it is evident that Alexander does not fit neatly into the Black Campus Movement, she also embodies the pluralist ideological sect of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement is usually characterized by a shift in gradualist approaches to integration and equity to a more militant, separatist stance. Alexander’s Black nationalism supported the

¹⁰ Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., “New Poets of the Forties and the Age of Optimism,” in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 102-113.

¹¹ Claudia Tate, “Black Women Writers at Work: An Interview with Margaret Walker,” in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*. (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 30.

¹² John Peoples, *To Survive and Thrive: The Quest for a True University*. (Jackson: Town Square Books, 1995): 113-114.

radical transformation of society into an eventual pluralistic society, even if by violent means. Alexander understood herself as a Black humanist in the African American literary tradition, and this political agenda informed the philosophy of the Black Studies Institute. In addition, Alexander used the Institute and her writing to begin to carve out the foundation of a Black feminist epistemology and pedagogy—even if not completely matured as Black feminism. Most importantly, as a Black woman faculty member who utilized neither the direct action tactics of the national Black student movements or membership in grassroots organizations, Alexander’s intellectual work as a professor and director of this Black Studies Institute illustrates that she was an ideological leader of her own merit with her own tactical repertoire.

Sitting on the demands of Black Student activists, Black faculty have only been provided space to exist as invisible, pawns, or antagonists in the Black Campus Movement. Ibram Kendi and Joy Ann Williamson’s works does mention both Black and white faculty at both historically Black and historically white institutions; however, these faculty-activists do nothing more than operate as pawns within the student-led Black Campus Movement. If these professors and administrators are not working with students to create Black Studies departments, they are often held up as the antagonists, accomodationists or staunch defenders of the racist educational system. As Williamson argues, campus administrators and governing boards did not share the same ideas concerning the worth of mixing academics and activism.¹³ Further, Williamson writes about the overemphasis of the “special status” of students,

“Their lack of familial and occupational obligations, free time, youthful energy, idealism, or membership in an organized institution in the black community are the most common factors cited in the literature in explaining their high rate of participation when compared with nonstudents. There was something unique about the college environment, generational experiences, and psychology of late adolescence that facilitated activism, but

¹³ Joy Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower: Black Colleges and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi*. (Teachers College Press, 2014): 3.

this type of discussion fails to address the intense countermovement students faced. In doing so, the literature minimizes the contentious and dangerous business of activism.”¹⁴

Activism, or at least, going against the status quo for faculty was a dangerous business also. However, faculty, campus administrators, and governing boards’ polythetic voices and multidimensional experiences within the challenge to higher education practices are not amplified. This is not the case for students. Kendi’s *The Black Campus Movement* has highlighted that students were not single issue activists who were not only concerned with the reconstruction of the curriculum. As Kendi argues, these students were concerned with a range of campus alterations: the end to paternalism and racism, ladder altruism, normalized mask of whiteness, standardization of exclusion, and moralized contraption; the addition of more black students, faculty, administrators, and Black Studies Courses, programs and departments; and at almost every HBCU students fought for a “Black University” instead of a white-controlled, Eurocentric, bourgeoisie, accommodationist “Negro University.”¹⁵ While students did protest these oppressive campus realities, Williamson reminds scholars not to take students from their campus realities; their identity as activists eclipsed their identities—responsibilities, stresses, limitations—as students. Faculty-activists had the same constraints placed on them and were equally concerned with the educational practices and ideologies in higher education.

Furthermore, historical scholarship has focused on the legitimate “Black Studies Department” as sites for historical study while overlooking the ways that other programs that did not reach departmental status affected the direction of Black Studies. The Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People did not reach departmental status and was unsuccessful in creating majors or minors in Black Studies. In her research, Joy Ann Williamson

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵ Ibram Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 4.

has defined movement centers as “organizations or institutions that enable a subjugated group to engage in sustained protests by providing communication networks, organized groups, experienced leaders, and an opportunity to pool social capital.”¹⁶ Williamson identifies the weaknesses of historical study on Black colleges as movement centers in scholars’ inability to “provide an in-depth treatment of the college campus as an organizing site.”¹⁷ Similarly, as movement centers, Williamson pinpoints that the existing historical literature treats colleges as a “monolithic entity”.¹⁸ Just as there is no one Black college experience in social movement history, there is also no one Black Studies experience. To paraphrase Williamson, to treat the Black Studies experience as “identical incorrectly credits structures and organizations with the power to attract participants and assumes the inevitability” of department formation.¹⁹ Black Studies programs that did not reach department status during the Black Campus Movement should be considered for historical study in order to complicate discussions about authenticity, productivity, and the development and challenges of Black Studies.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This research uses both Black Freedom Studies and the Black Campus Movement as theoretical frameworks. As Jeanne Theoharis explains in “Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals,” Black Freedom Studies aims to address the “limitations and misinterpretations inherent in the popular narrative of the movement.”²⁰ It turns back to the movement to ask, or re-ask, fundamental questions relating to “origin, direction, and ideology.” Black Freedom Struggle re-asks questions pertaining to “*who* led and undertook these

¹⁶ Joy Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 1-2.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

²⁰ Jeanne Theoharis, “Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals,” *History Compass* 4 no. 2 (2006): 349.

movements, *what* the movement was actually about, *where* it took place, *when* it happened and *why* people engaged in a movement (or what they hoped to change).”²¹ Most specifically, Black Freedom Studies hopes to complicate single narratives that reduce the movement down to a single locality, organizer or campaign. This research embraces this paradigm by calling out the student-centered, historically white university centered, male-centered, activist-centered nature of historical scholarship around the foundation of Black Studies. By looking at Alexander’s Black Studies Institute, we can reconsider some assumptions about the Black Campus Movement and expand some of its basic premises—particularly as a student centered, protest centered, departmentally based historiography.

2 METHODOLOGY

This project is an intellectual, social movement, and intellectual history that places Alexander and the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People (also the Black Studies Institute or the Institute) in its social, political, and historical contexts. The Institute will be used as a catalyst for analyzing Alexander’s philosophy of education while also exploring her pedagogical literature. It concerns itself with these questions:

- What is Margaret Walker Alexander’s philosophy of education, and how did her life and her work, particularly as expressed through the Black Studies Institute, illustrate it?
- How does Margaret Walker Alexander’s intellectual and educational work compare to other theorists of her time and/or expand from the work of other educational thinkers?
- How does this Institute fit into the national Black Studies and Black Freedom movements? What is the role of students and faculty in developing Black Studies and challenging traditional education standards?

²¹ Ibid.

In order to answer these questions, primary source research is conducted at the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center in Jackson, Mississippi. Archival research related to the founding of the institute and several of its programs from 1968-1979, Alexander's final year as director, is housed in the center, along with Alexander's personal papers which she donated to the Institute in three installments before and after her death on September 4, 1998, September 21, 1999, and July 7, 2000. Much of Alexander's correspondence documents are present in the Margaret Walker National Research Center as well as programs, memos, newsletters, and other primary source documents that help to tell the narrative of Alexander's involvement with Black Studies and her contemporaries. However, archival research alone will not be sufficient in reclaiming Alexander's educational philosophy. Therefore, a textual analysis of Alexander's essays and writings, especially as collected in Maryemma Graham's edited volume, *On Being Female, Black, and Free*, and Alexander's poetry will provide a deeper conceptualization of her educational philosophy. Also, in order to engage in social movement historiography, this work explores seminal texts in the Black Campus Movement historiography including both Kendi's *The Black Campus Movement* and Joy Ann Williamson's *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*. The Mississippi movement is intrinsically tied into the development of the Black Studies Institute; considerations of political and social struggles happening on and off campus provide important contexts for exploring the Institute in relationship to the movement. Primary source research with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History's Sovereignty Commission digital archives will be consulted to engage in Mississippi movement history.

The chapters of this volume include: Chapter One, "Introduction"; Chapter Two, "Methodology"; Chapter Three, "A Historiography of the Black Campus Movement: From Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Freedom Studies"; Chapter Four, "Jackson State College,

Margaret Walker, and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi”); Chapter Three, “Professionalizing Black Studies at Jackson State College: The Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People”; and the concluding Chapter 6, “Writing the Social World: Alexander’s Educational Paradigm for Change.”

3 A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE BLACK CAMPUS MOVEMENT: FROM CIVIL RIGHTS, BLACK POWER, AND BLACK FREEDOM STUDIES

In 2008, Derrick Alridge published *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* which argued that DuBois, outside of his great debates with Booker T. Washington, had been largely neglected throughout intellectual and educational history. Where these histories have been written, they lacked the historical consideration and complexity of Du Bois’ educational thought. The goal was to situate Du Bois within an African American intellectual tradition that moves him beyond a binary consideration and, instead, looks at him in the expanse of his lifetime beside significant educational theorists of his day. Most importantly, Alridge concerned himself with Du Bois’ ideas as expressed in multiple literary forms—published and unpublished writings, speeches, research studies, and novels. In addition, Alridge situated Du Bois within a historical and political context, analyzing how Du Bois dealt with the social realities of his time, from boyhood through the civil rights movement. Each of these historical moments played an instrumental role in shaping DuBois’ intellectual and educational philosophy.²²

This study does not set out to do a comprehensive intellectual and educational history of Margaret Walker Alexander, but it does look at Walker as both professor and director of the Black Studies Institute in the context of the Black Campus Movement and the Black Freedom

²² Derrick Alridge, *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History*, (Teachers College Press: 2008).

Struggle in the nation and in Mississippi. This historical scholarship embraces the Black Freedom Studies paradigm, while being aware of its theoretical weaknesses. Margaret Walker Alexander navigated many social movements, political, artistic, and ideological, and exemplifies a unique legacy at Jackson State College which flows into the national and international narratives of social movement historiography. What we can learn about Alexander's unique form of protest and activism as a faculty member and artist is not inherently contradictory to the Black Freedom Studies scholarship but offers a useful expansion of this interpretative school.

Historians of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements have undergone various interpretative, theoretical, and methodological treatments of these movements, with the recent decade of scholarship conglomerating and detracting from the tradition of Civil Rights and Black Power historiography—particularly, the Black Campus Movement as a school of historiography, starting with Wayne Glasker's *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967-1990* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 2002) and Joy Ann Williamson's *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-1975* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press 2003). In 2008, Ibram Rogers (now Ibram Kendi) coined the term "Black Campus Movement" in his article, "The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement" and, four years later, published his monograph, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* which became a seminal text in understanding the dimensions of the Black Campus Movement. This framework stands in the tradition of civil rights historiography that focused on local people and regions to understand history of the movement from the bottom up. Black Campus Movement historiography specifically focuses on the college campus as a site for exploration, particularly student activity.

3.1 Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Freedom Studies

In 1995, both John Dittmer's and Charles Payne's books were published, ushering in a new historical practice in Civil Rights and Black Power historiography. Previous historical scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement offered a classical understanding of the movement, starting with the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, moving through the direct action protests of the early 1960s, and ending with Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and the subsequent passing of the major federal laws in 1964 and 1965. These two books, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* by Dittmer and *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* by Payne, signaled a shift in the coverage of the Mississippi movement and the national social movement. Through local, directed studies, these new histories challenged the popular historical periodization, the separation of Civil Rights and Black Power as distinct political movements, and the regionalism of the movement.

Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, shifted the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) back from beginning in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott to a regional study of the CRM in Mississippi. Historian John Dittmer traces the Mississippi CRM to 1946, directly after World War II. Choosing to study local people, Dittmer sets the stage for a grassroots historiography of the CRM to include the everyday acts, organizing, and resistance to Black advancement in Mississippi. In this historical narrative, characters who grew to have nationwide significance, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, and Anne Moody, author of *The Coming of Age in Mississippi*, are highlighted; however, lesser known actors across the state such as Aaron Henry, Bob Moses, Joyce and Dorie Ladner, and Clyde Kennard come into light. Dittmer's historiography places Mississippi on the national and

international scale, tying together seemingly miniscule events in Mississippi such as the Biloxi wade-in to the direct action protest at North Carolina A&T. In this study, powerhouses such as Martin Luther King, Jr. become just another actor in a grand story, not minimizing their contributions but uplifting the importance of others in creating and sustaining the movement.

These new historical considerations began to be considered what Jacqueline Hall calls the “Long Movement” and what Jeanne Theoharis calls the “Black Freedom Struggle.” Theoharis’ most crushing critique of the previous scholarship of the civil rights movement is that “this popular history takes away the black freedom struggle’s relevance for today by focusing on charismatic leadership, long-suffering rural folk, and backward Southern rednecks”.²³ This new interpretive school returns to the scholarship of the civil rights movement to clear up the “limitations and misconceptions inherent in the popular narrative” by “re-asking the fundamental questions of origin, direction, and ideology of the movement.”²⁴ These fundamental questions range from who was the leader of the movement, who participated in the movement, what was the movement about, where and when did the movement take place, why were they engaged in the movement, and what did they seek to change. These sporadic accounts of the movement strip these organizers of their agency and overlook the continuity of the struggle for freedom. Instead, the Black Freedom Struggle has its roots in the 1930s and 1940s. As Theoharis states, “These movements married self defense with nonviolent direct action, radical economic critiques with desegregation protest with international solidarity, and relied on organizing and ground-level theorizing of local problems as well as charisma and national organizations.”²⁵

²³ Jeanne Theoharis, “Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals,” 349.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 349.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 350.

Civil rights historiography has also looked to define a movement by a charismatic leader, minimizing the collective and multilayered tensions and dimensionality of the movement's goals, aims, and actors. Specifically, the historiography of the movement has been King-centric. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham defines it, the "Great Man-centered paradigm has dominated civil rights history and determined what is looked at and who is seen."²⁶ Instead of looking at the 250,000 marchers and organizers at the 1963 March on Washington, historians have instead chosen to focus on "the leaders on the platform high above the crowd."²⁷ By re-shifting the focus away from a charismatic leader, Great Man, namely, King-centric paradigm, women, young adult, youth and student activism, radical activism, white student and faculty activism, and queer activism has space for discussion. For example, looking at the March on Washington, Bayard Rustin, a homosexual Black socialist, was the brainchild of the extremely large and successful event, but because of his sexuality and political orientation, he remained in the background as an advisor and strategist. This complicates the narrative of the CRM as a highly sexualized arena and begs further questions of the goals and strategies of the movement.

The Black Freedom Struggle also merges the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, demythologizing the misnomer that Black Power was violent and reactionary—as if the CRM was neither—and began post-Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black Power, too, has roots within the 1940s and 1950s (and before with Garveyism) with the ideological, theological and strategic roots in organized nationalism. As Theoharis states, "This rethinking moves Black Power out of the riots and rebels narrative that it often occupies and shows it instead as a series of organized local, national, and international movements that have their roots in the 1940s and 1950s."²⁸

²⁶ Ibid, 350.

²⁷ Ibid, 350.

²⁸ Ibid, 353.

Instead of its often violent characterization, Black Power used militant nonviolent strategies or employed both nonviolence and armed resistance. Also, Black Freedom Studies shifts the narrative outside of the South, showing that similar fights have been undertaken in the American Northeast, Midwest, and West. In Los Angeles, activists “promised confrontational direct action if school segregation in Los Angeles was not addressed.”²⁹

Scholars have, however, critiqued the Black Freedom Struggle as a “Long Movement.” In “The “Long Movement” as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” Sundiata Keia Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang define the four interrelated conceptualizations of Black Freedom Studies as locality, reperiodization, continuity, and the South as not distinct. As Cha-Jua and Lang state, “We question the adequacy of the Long Movement thesis because it collapses periodization schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the [Black Liberation Movement] (BLM), and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience.”³⁰ While they agree that the long movement has been instrumental and corrective in illuminating the ideological and strategic heterogeneity of previous scholarship of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, they believe that its most crucial flaw is its “totalizing perspective” which they consider ahistorical.³¹ The long movement must have a beginning and an end, which Black Freedom Studies scholars have failed to agree on. As they advise, “...scholars must acknowledge an *end* of the Civil Rights and Black Power waves of the [Black Liberation Movement]. Recognizing the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as waves in a broader more complex river of resistance and affirmation, the Black

²⁹ Ibid, 355.

³⁰ Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The “Long Movement” as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History* no. 2 (2007): 265.

³¹ Ibid, 269.

Liberation Movement, is *not* tantamount to acceptance of a declension narrative, emphasizing a “golden age” of nonviolent protest followed by a period of black militancy and racial chauvinism.”³² Cha-Jua and Lang also acknowledge that the Black Freedom Struggle and the Long Civil Rights Movement are two different schools of thought, specifically in how they imagine the chronology of the movements. The scholars also critique how the meanings and distinctions of the Civil Rights and Black Power narratives are bled together and the ubiquitous nature of the scholarship of the movement, characterizing it as “wandering” through regional contexts by oversimplifying differences and amplifying similarities. What Cha-Jua and Lang argue for is “an historical-theoretical framework of the BLM, one that is mindful of political, economic, spatial, ideological, discursive, and cultural factors, as well as subjective activity, in shaping paradigms of African American resistance in consistent, though contextually specific, ways across time and space.”³³ While the Black Freedom Studies interpretive school has been healing and corrective in illuminating, addressing, redressing, and protecting the legacies of the Black Liberation Movement, it has also been seductive in its totalizing reach in critiquing the racist, imperialist social structure of the United States, assuming that all regions, times, and goals have remained the same, and therefore the tactics towards liberation.

The long, varied movements set the stage for the founding of the Black Studies Institute at Jackson State College. The mix of student activism on campus, efforts by administration to resist the state legislators, nonviolent direct action protests, spontaneous student rebellions, and the emergence of Black Power activism all made the Institute’s founding possible.

³² Ibid, 270.

³³ Ibid, 283.

3.1.1 *Black Campus Movement*

In his 2008 article, “The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement,” Ibram Kendi coined the term “Black Campus Movement” (BCM) to describe the “struggle waged by Black Student Unions (BSUs) from 1966 to 1975 to reform American higher education.”³⁴ Kendi had taken issue with the limited coverage of student activism on both historically white and Black colleges and universities—a problem he attributed to the lack of historical scholarship on the Black Power Movement. As scholarship on the Black Power Movement had grown, acknowledgement of the seminal involvement on Black students has been mute or inadequate. Kendi argued that the BCM should be “a predominant part of any narrative or analysis of the Black Power Movement.”³⁵ There were at least 85 protests by Black students from 1968-1969. Ninety percent of sit ins were held by Black students on college campuses. The BCM was probably the most effective of any other sector of the Black Power Movement. By 2012, Kendi published a full length historical text, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. In 2014, Shirletta J. Kinchen published an essay, “Reviewing the Revolt: Moving towards a Historiography of the Black Campus Movement,” tracing the historical scholarship of the BCM, focusing on Kendi’s text, Stefan Bradley’s *Harlem Versus Columbia: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*, Wayne Glasker’s *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967-1990*, and Joy Ann Williamson’s *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois*.

While new studies on the BCM have rightfully inserted the depth of Black student activism on campus during the age of Black Power activism into historical consideration, faculty,

³⁴ Ibram Kendi, “The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement,” *The Journal of Social History* 42 no. 1 (2008): 175.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 175.

particularly black faculty, have taken a back seat. Carolyn Brown's biography of Margaret Walker Alexander, *Song of My Life*, reveals a critical gap in the BCM—where are the faculty and where are the women in this narrative? The Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People was founded by Margaret Walker Alexander at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi in 1968. Even though it was “simply a room with a desk and a telephone,”³⁶ there is no mention of the Institute in full length texts of the Black Campus Movement. As Brown pinpoints with Julianne Malveaux's review of Martha Biondi's *Black Revolution on Campus*, photos of women are lacking in Biondi's book. As Malveaux critiques, “Unfortunately, Biondi—or her publisher—reinforces gender bias with the photos that are included in the book. Only one features a black woman, Eva Jefferson [Patterson].”³⁷ My theses work hopes to reinvent Black faculty women, like Margaret Walker Alexander, into the Black Campus Movement historiography as complex historical actors who are not in the background to this student-led movement.

The Black Campus Movement is a new historical field. However, works such as Tim Spofford's *Lynch Street* should be noted as foundational texts that critically considered the roles and perspectives of Black student organizers specifically in trying to meet campus alterations.³⁸ The Black Campus Movement is still a young scholarly field and scholars are still met with new theoretical and methodological questions—how can the scholarship move away from autobiographical and local studies to more national and international studies; how can the BCM

³⁶ Carolyn Brown, *Song of My Life*, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 67.

³⁸ Tim Spofford *Lynch Street: The May 1970s Slayings at Jackson State College*. (Kent: Kent State University, 1988).

be periodized; who makes up the BCM and what were they interested in accomplishing—similar to the way that Ibram Kendi’s *Black Campus Movement* has sought to do. However, it is clear that the Black Campus Movement cannot be adequately studied without critically considering the other scholarships of the Black Freedom Studies. It is as much a part of the development as it is a part of the critique.

3.2 Black Feminist Historiography

The emergence of Deborah Gray White’s 1985 *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* brought about a critical intervention in historical scholarship challenging racist and sexist methodological processes. The emergence of African American history presented itself as an antidote to the racist historical practices of historical scholarship practiced by mainly white male historians, but it did not alleviate the profound sore of racist sexism. White admits that African American history seemed to need to restore Black male masculinity while Black women remained nearly invisible in historical scholarship. Since the publishing of White’s seminal text, Black women’s history has witnessed a healthy renaissance. While White’s text was successful on many fronts, her arguments about the methodological and theoretical processes are informative. During her research and writing process, White revealed that

“...African-American women’s records were often deemed *suspect* or otherwise *nonauthentic* (my italics) often because they *were* (White’s italics) black women’s records. Manuscripts that drew heavily on them were dismissed as nonobjective, as were historians, especially black women historians, who wrote them... To legitimize black women’s history, black women historians, in particular, were put in the ironic and untenable position of having to be especially careful to corroborate black women’s sources with those of whites and black men—the very source material that made black women invisible in the first place.”³⁹

³⁹ Deborah White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3-4.

Researching Margaret Walker Alexander honors White's historical tradition. With Alexander, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker, we see evidence of Black Studies as having Black feminist beginnings, especially with the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival hosted at Jackson State University in 1973. Margaret Walker Alexander, like Sanchez and Walker, is a poet, and much of her poetic and literary work achieved historical feats. This historical scholarship considers the poem as historical source, primary and secondary source, in order to understand the epistemological transformations and argumentations of Alexander as an intellectual and educational philosopher and activist in the Black Campus Movement.

Sonia Sanchez, in her essay, "Ruminations/Reflections," theorizes poets as prophets who create the social world through the manipulation of symbols, language, dialect, idioms, and imagery of the subconscious of a people. As Sanchez writes, "Like the priest and the prophet, with whom he/she was often *synonymous*, the poet in some societies has had infinite powers to interpret life... Art, no matter what its intention, reacts to or reflects the culture it springs from."⁴⁰ The poet has, throughout pre-modern society, been the historian, the keeper of the knowledge, and the connection to the other realm. She served a theocratic function. Orature shaped the "world-sense" of the hearers, elevating the poet to an immensely valued place in society.⁴¹ As Oyeronke Oyewumi explains of a non-Western social formation in Yoruba society, "What these Yoruba categories tell us is that the body is not always in view and on view for categorization. The classic example is the female who played the roles of *oba* (ruler), *omo*

⁴⁰ Sonia Sanchez and Jacqueline Wood, ed., "Ruminations/Reflections," in *I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't and Other Plays*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

⁴¹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense to Western Gender Discourse*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2-3. As Oyewumi explains, "The term 'worldview,' which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West's privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term "world-sense" is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups."

(offspring), *oko*, *aya*, *iya* (mother), and *alawo* (diviner-priest) all in one body.”⁴² As a daughter, wife, mother, teacher, director of the Black Studies Institute, and poet, Alexander, all in one body, defied Western gender and body logic and epistemology through her poetic and historical work. Audre Lorde also thinks of Black women’s poetic work as the work of reaching into “ancient and hidden” places. Lorde argued that Black women poets needed to reclaim the language and power of poetry: “But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, Black, non-European view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes.”⁴³ When Black women poets reclaim this historical, prophetic work, there will be a “revelation or distillation of experience.”⁴⁴

The poetic tradition of historiography was interrupted with the scientific revolution. Leopold von Ranke is credited with establishing historical standards, professionalizing the process for training at the University of Berlin between 1824 and 1871.⁴⁵ History became a university-determined discipline, instead of a folk aesthetic that represented the subconscious of the people. As Anna Green and Kathleen Troupe write, “Rejecting many of the sources previously used by historians—particularly personal memoirs, or accounts written after the event—Ranke argued that historians should only use ‘primary’ or original sources, those which were generated at the time of the event under consideration.”⁴⁶ These new historical standards, which amplified the validity processes for historiography, decentered the artistic. Ironically,

⁴² Ibid, 13-14.

⁴³ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (New York: Random House, 1984), 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁵ Anna Green and Kathleen Troupe, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth Century History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 2.

these historians of the empiricist and positivist tradition labeled themselves as craftsmen, artists, not necessarily for the aesthetic values but as a metaphor for being “hands on” with historical writing—doing tangible, skillful work. In this tradition, historians valued methodology over theory, things over ideas, academics over arts—which to them, was imaginative, intangible, mythological, unrealistic, and unreliable. History had to be authenticated, essentially, housed, written, recorded, and/or booked.

Barbara Christian takes to task the commodification, homogenization, and marginalization of theoretical traditions in the academy. First, Christian makes it plain: “For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative form, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.”⁴⁷ Next, Christian deals with the marginalization of theory as a practice:

“The race for theory—with its linguistic jargon; its emphasis on quoting its prophets; its tendency toward “biblical” exegesis; its refusal to even mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones; its preoccupation with mechanical analysis about culture—has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature, and others have developed intense writing blocks and are puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the language set adrift in literary circles.”⁴⁸

In the historical tradition, the marginalization of aesthetic sources has everything to do with history’s obsession with mythology—what is and is not true or valid. History, as a commodified, institutionally based, university dominated discipline, has its roots within a white supremacist capitalistic patriarchal imperialist epistemology and axiology. Knowledge forms that are not in sync with white male intellectual standards are not valued forms of history. The obsession to

⁴⁷ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory.” *Feminist Studies, Inc.* 14 no. 1 (1988): 68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 69.

value “truths” that look like traditional historical theories has made non-normative intellectual work less valued as capital; worse, it has homogenized a resilient historical tradition that has painted non-normative intellectual work as antagonistic and inferior to institutionally reproduced historical work.

Borrowing from Michelle Rowley, historiography has to reexamine its white supremacist capitalistic patriarchal imperialist genealogies. Historiography, for all its changes and transfers over time, has not been able to solidly escape its “generational thinking.” Writing and researching history, we have been guilty of placing priority on textual evidence as the most valid historical source. We have also trapped ourselves into obsessing over mythology—thinking that we can render the truth of history by eliminating myth—when mythology is just as much a historical phenomenon. This is where Black feminist historiography pops in as a critical intervention. History must take a “whereabouts unknown” stance towards historical methodology in order to embrace the “politics and conditions of emergence” specifically “to challenge traditional archival modes of telling [history].”⁴⁹ As Michelle Rowley reaffirms, “[T]he politics and conditions of emergence by no means dispenses with the importance of history. It simply challenges the idea of one narrative or mode by which we can tell such a history.”⁵⁰ Such a method for doing history exposes the spatiotemporal and interdisciplinary nature of historiography that redefines the axiology of historical epistemologies and aesthetics within the historical discipline.

This historical study considers the methodological and theoretical concerns of Ibram Kendi’s *The Black Campus Movement*, Black Freedom Studies, and Black feminist

⁴⁹ Michelle Rowley, “The Idea of Ancestry: Of Feminist Genealogies and Many Other Things,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80-81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 81.

historiography. By turning the frame away from students or some Great Man, this scholarship pushes the boundaries the Black Liberation Movement.

4 JACKSON STATE COLLEGE, MARGARET WALKER ALEXANDER, AND THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN MISSISSIPPI

*“Shotguns, high-powered rifles crackling in the night...”—Margaret Walker Alexander,
“Jackson State, May 15, 1970”*

On September 21, 1966, Vice President and President Elect of Jackson State College (JSC) wrote Margaret Walker Alexander a letter of congratulations on her novel, *Jubilee*, praising its critical success in local and national publications.⁵¹ Alexander’s historical novel, based on the oral histories she heard as a little girl from her grandmother and years of primary and secondary source research, was finally completed as her dissertation project from the University of Iowa’s Writer’s Workshop in 1965. With a newly published, highly acclaimed book in circulation and the new president at JSC, John A Peoples to be inaugurated, Alexander’s career as an educator and writer in the midst of the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi took a different turn. Peoples’ letter symbolized more than congratulations for Alexander’s literary success. It served as a representation of a new collaborative relationship between Alexander and a more open-minded president of the college. Peoples probably sensed Alexander’s frustrations with her stagnation at the college, disappointment with her pay despite the labor she put into programming and teaching, and with the current president, Jacob L. Reddix, who she admits was

⁵¹ John A. Peoples to Margaret Walker Alexander, 21 September 1966, Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

so hostile to her in a faculty meeting that she was near tears.⁵² Looking forward in his presidency, Peoples wrote that Alexander's "influence has contributed indelibly to the advancement of the educational objectives of Jackson State College. It is my hope that the College will be privileged to have your services as it continues to achieve new heights in the intellectual development of the young people of this State."⁵³

Peoples' recognition of Alexander's influence was spot on. In the nearly twenty years that Alexander had served at JSC in the Department of English, Alexander had recruited dignitaries such as Arna Bontemps, Melvin Tolson, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes—each of these in her first three years as a faculty member—to engage in events at the college. Under Peoples' presidency, Alexander brought more special attention to the small Black state college in Mississippi by recruiting St. Clair Drake, John Hope Franklin, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, and other well known Black scholars and artists. Under Peoples' leadership, Jackson State College expanded its academic capacity and reached university status in 1977, only ten years into his tenure. Two years later, Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander retired.

The expansion of JSC coincided with the aggressive Black student movement, the Jackson Movement, and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi. Despite the homogenized popular narrative of Jackson State as a place resistant to civil rights activity, JSC was a place of spontaneous student rebellion, Black nationalist and civil rights student organizing and political education, and dissent to the racial, class, and gender order. Historian Jelani Favors describes this

⁵² Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., "Black Women in Academia," in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 30-31.

⁵³ John A. Peoples to Margaret Walker Alexander, 21 September 1966, Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

apolitical characterization of JSC as “stringently controlled atmospheres of voices of dissent.”⁵⁴ This picture of Jackson State College as a stringent state-supported, conservatively Black-male led institution looms and has loomed into historiographical scholarship, namely, Tim Spofford’s *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* and John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*.⁵⁵ As Spofford writes, “Though just two blocks from the Masonic Temple, their campus might as well have been fifty miles away, for all the help they were allowed to give the Tougaloo activists.”⁵⁶ Spofford characterized JSC as an apolitical island divested from Black social movement activity. Further, Spofford pointed out JSC’s liability as a small Black college controlled by a white board, “And unlike Tougaloo, a private college, Jackson State was run by compliant Black administrators who depended upon the all-white State Board of Higher Education to keep their school open.”⁵⁷ Spofford’s analysis relies heavily on a public versus private college debate, which argues that Black private colleges were bastions of political activity and the opposing colleges were restricted of this activity because of financial constraints of colleges and employees. However, Joy Ann Williamson argues that “a college’s relationship to the state did not completely dictate activism.”⁵⁸

Adding to the “stringently-controlled” characterization, Tougaloo college student and activist Anne Moody describes, with raw intensity, the nature of the popular narrative of JSC in her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*:

“Dorie Ladner, a SNCC worker, and I decided to run up to Jackson State College and get some of the students there to participate in the march. I was sure we could convince some of them to protest Medgar’s death. Since the march was to start shortly after lunch, we had a couple of hours to do some recruiting. When we got to Jackson State, class was in

⁵⁴ Jelani Favors, “The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda: The Fascinating and Tragic Life of Margaret Walker Alexander,” *Review of Black Political Economy*, 43 no. 2 (2016): 120.

⁵⁵ Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street*; John Dittmer, *Local People*.

⁵⁶ See chapter one of Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 4.

session. ‘That’s a damn shame.’ I thought. “They should have dismissed school today, in honor of Medgar.””⁵⁹

Moody’s account of organizing at JSC is filled with frustration and pity for what seems to be an unflinching resolve of students, faculty, and administration to remain oblivious to issues beyond the classroom and the campus. In Moody’s mind, the death of civil rights beacon, Medgar Evers, should have caused a collapse in the order of the college. No Black institution or student should have been able to sit idly by while Black freedom fighters were being murdered and Black freedoms were being denied.

Influenced by the shadow of Moody’s impassioned plea—“It’s a shame, it really is a shame. This morning Medgar Evers was murdered and here you sit in a damn classroom with books in front of your faces, pretending you don’t even know he’s been killed.”—historiographical scholarship has embraced the shame of JSC as an institution that was committed to political inactivity around the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi.⁶⁰ Jackson State College surely did not open its arm wide to movement activity. The atmosphere that President Jacob L. Reddix maintained ensured that political activity remained clandestine and indirect. However, as the scholarship of Favors reports, students at JSC engaged in various political activities, participating in the militant Communist youth organization, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, attending an NAACP student’s conference, and engaging in political writings in the college’s student publication, *The Blue and White Flash* from the 1940s through the 1960s.⁶¹ In addition, Black faculty, like Margaret Walker Alexander, also resisted the political and ideological subjugation of the state, and she used her position as faculty-activist and director of the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People to create

⁵⁹ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. (Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 303.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 303.

⁶¹ Favors, “The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda, 120.”

an ideological center that impacted political and cultural incidents on the local, regional, and national levels.

In “The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda: The Fascinating and Tragic Life of Margaret Walker Alexander,” Favors places Alexander’s writings and teachings within the context of a Long Black Campus Movement. As a professor, Alexander was able to engage in teaching that Favors calls Alexander’s “subtle preaching” in order to move students to think about freedom, justice and civil rights.⁶² It was a common practice for Black professors to create “interstitial spaces” where “scholar-activists like Walker entered into their classrooms or offices, closed their doors, and began cultivating race pride, idealism, and purpose for a new generation of students.”⁶³ Favors traces Alexander’s tenure at the beginning of her career at the college, in 1949, where Alexander engaged in “subtle preaching” to her students and wrote most of her thoughts about oppressions in her journal, to 1961 before she took a two year sabbatical to complete her doctorate. Throughout this time to the early sixties, Alexander, as Favors shows, observed and commented on the movement through her private journals. However, with the death of her close friend and neighbor, Medgar Evers, on June 12, 1963, Alexander’s pedagogical and poetic voice made a more politically direct transformation, and she became more of a public critic of white supremacy, sexism, classism, and American militarism. She also created a political and aesthetic pedagogy that aimed to engineer a movement of Black scholars, artists, teachers, and public officials that could transform the state and the country. She did this as a participant in the Black Campus Movement, cultivating a politicized environment with Black students and faculty, and actively engaged in creating a new generation of scholars, artists and teachers who could use their education to address pressing social issues.

⁶² Ibid, 112.

⁶³ Ibid, 113.

Entering Jackson State College: Reddix and Alexander

Margaret Walker graduated from the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop with her master's degree in 1940, the same year that Jacob L. Reddix became president of the Mississippi Negro Training School, which was formerly Jackson College. Reddix not only inherited a higher education institution with a new name, he also inherited a school that was transitioning from a private college to public college. On May 6, 1940, Governor Paul B. Johnson signed House Bill No. 722 into law, which decreed that Jackson College move to become a state-institution, and its name changed to Mississippi Negro Training School. The white members of the state legislature changed the name of the higher education institution because they believed that Blacks went to college to become industrial laborers, not highly educated people.⁶⁴ Reddix, dealing with the legislative might of the white legislators in Mississippi state politics, had to redesign the curriculum at Mississippi Negro Training School, changing the school from a four-year liberal arts school to a two-year junior college. The Mississippi legislators not only held racially inferior and exploitative views of Black students, they also did not believe in adequately funding the institution. Reddix's administration applied for a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund for the first year of his tenure. The Rosenwald Fund promised \$30,000 to the institution if the state would match those funds. The state refused to match the funds and only gave the school \$10,000.⁶⁵

The experience of Black higher education institutions in the separate and unequal Jim Crow South was characterized by both 1) the refusal of the state to fully support Black education financially, ideologically, and politically and 2) the philanthropic, often paternalistic support of

⁶⁴ Lelia Rhodes, *Jackson State University: The First One Hundred Years, 1877-1977*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1979): 102-103.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 104-105.

Black education by corporate white benefactors. Most Black colleges were founded through white benevolence and religious activism, so the practice of interracial collaboration in Black collegiate tradition extends throughout the existence of Black colleges.⁶⁶ Black colleges and scholars were often at the mercy of these white benefactors and had to politically navigate proposals and depend heavily on them for their resources. When the state of Mississippi elected to end its funding of Tougaloo College in 1890, lump-sum donations from philanthropic organizations kept the school from going out of business.⁶⁷ Similarly, in 1981, nearly one hundred years later, when Margaret Walker Alexander helped Paula Giddings get funding for her groundbreaking text, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, she had to rely on safe language in order to receive funding.⁶⁸ In her study of Julius Rosenwald's philanthropic efforts, Mary Hoffschwelle reveals that Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish corporate mogul, began supporting African American education through partnership with Booker T. Washington. Rosenwald and Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama jointly used their influence to build over five thousand public schools in fifteen southern states for Black students. White philanthropy had a major impact on the Black southern landscape, increasing African American literacy and creating opportunities for Blacks to attend higher education institutions.⁶⁹ Reddix's educational career was impacted by Rosenwald, also. In 1939 he accepted a Rosenwald Fund in order to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago before being appointed to an advisory position in the United States Department of Agriculture.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 15-28.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁸ Margaret Walker Alexander to Joel Colton, 30 January 1981, Series I Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

⁶⁹ Mary Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006): 1-2, 273.

⁷⁰ Rhodes, *Jackson State University*, 103-104.

During the early years of Reddix's presidency, Alexander was focused on publishing her poetic master's thesis "For My People" and submitting it to a well-respected poetry competition at Yale. By 1942, she was awarded the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, the first Black person with the honor. She also met her future husband, Firnist James "Alex" Alexander, a soldier.⁷¹ Interestingly, Alexander was staunchly against the military and rejected Alex's advances in the beginning because of his occupation. Alexander remained a staunch critic of American militarism and connected worldwide oppression and anti-black racism to American militarism, especially after the slaughter of two students by the Jackson police force and the National Guard. She was also encouraged by Langston Hughes to join Yaddo, an artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York.⁷² For the next five years Alexander lectured and engaged in a reading tour with the National Artists and Concert Corporation. She was also awarded a Rosenwald fellowship to continue researching *Jubilee* in 1944. This was the same year that President Reddix's administrative board successfully petitioned to change the name of the Mississippi Negro Training School to Jackson College for Negro Teachers and reinstate it as a four-year institution.⁷³

The lives of Alexander and Reddix in the early 1940s reveal significant similarities around the experiences of these two Black professionals and their experiences with success and struggle and lays the groundwork for understanding the complex relationship between Reddix, Alexander, and Jackson State College. Reddix, by 1939, had published research on cooperative farming and was recruited as a scholar in the United States Department of Agriculture. He immediately inherited an institution that was fighting to prove its legitimacy in the face of

⁷¹ Brown, *Song of My Life*, 49.

⁷² *Ibid*, 51.

⁷³ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 28.

outright white bigotry. The college was at the complete whim of white philanthropic organizations and struggled to provide a curriculum that could adequately train its students. The white legislative board wanted to contain the political environment at Jackson State College, and they strategically used the legislative process and funding to limit the possibilities of administrators, faculty and staff to use their classrooms and campuses as spaces for political agitation. As Williamson describes, “The all-white board of trustees selected Black administrators and faculty who would not encourage agitation against the racial hierarchy.” Similarly, as Williamson points out, “Legislators only minimally supported the newest Black public college in the state, and for the first two years under state control the institution received more money from private sources like the Julius Rosenwald Fund and the General Education Board than the state itself.”⁷⁴

While state boards did everything they could to control racial hegemony, they did not snuff out all possibilities for political activity or subversion. This is true of Reddix, who in 1949, hired Margaret Walker Alexander whose artistry and publications openly critiqued racial and class oppression. During her time in Chicago in the 1930s with Richard Wright and the South Side Writer’s Project, she had engaged with Communist thought and helped Wright by researching his social protest novel *Native Son*.⁷⁵ Her collection of poems made visible and public poems like “Southern Song” which lambasted lynching: “I want no mobs to wrench me from my southern rest; no/forms to take me in the night and burn my shack and/ make for me a

⁷⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁷⁵ Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., “Richard Wright,” in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 43-46.

nightmare full of oil and flame.”⁷⁶ Ekaterini Georgoudaki writes of Alexander’s “Southern Song”:

“The vivid images in “Southern Song” (sun, land, brook, corn, grass, ducks, frogs, etc.) are employed to appeal to the readers’ senses (sight, hearing, touch, and smell). Using a first-person speaker, free verse, long lines, rhythmic repetition, coordinating clauses, cataloging, and other stylistic devices, [Alexander] celebrates the harmony of the individual and collective Black self with the southern natural environment. She suggests, however, (in images of lynching and burning), that the violence brought by racial hatred threatens this harmony and the wholeness of the self.”⁷⁷

In post-World War II Mississippi, Alexander’s anti-lynching poem held direct significance to the political efforts of Black people resisting against the racial regime. As John Dittmer reveals in *Local People*, the NAACP became a visible presence in Mississippi after WWII. Dittmer explains, “Primarily a legalistic organization, the national NAACP had filed suits against the discriminatory laws and practices that violated the constitutional rights of Blacks and lobbied Congress to enact federal antilynching legislation, abolish the poll tax, and establish a permanent FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Committee).”⁷⁸ Whites used intimidation tactics, especially violence, in order to discourage Black citizens from engaging in political activity. Furthermore, as Charles Payne illustrates in *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, “Lynching is only one form of racial terror and statistics on it virtually always underestimate the reality, but between the end of Reconstruction and the modern civil rights era, Mississippi lynched 539 Blacks, more than any other state.”⁷⁹ Just between 1930 and 1950, as Payne reports, Mississippi experienced thirty-three lynchings.⁸⁰ Alexander’s anti-

⁷⁶ Margaret Walker, “Southern Song,” in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 11.

⁷⁷ Ekaterini Georgoudaki, “The South in Margaret Walker’s Poetry: Harbor and Sorrow Home,” in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*. (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 167.

⁷⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 29.

⁷⁹ Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 7-8.

lynching poetry was an act of resistance and decried the racially suppressive tactics of whites who were murdering Blacks without consequence.

Alexander was a famous poet by 1949 who had a volume of poetry published and was participating in reading tours. President Reddix's hiring Alexander should be understood as a subversive political act, rebelling against the political expectations of white legislators. It is clear that Alexander's poetry and thinking was consciously politicized and ran explicitly counter to the kinds of political education practices the white board of education desired on campus. Reddix, however, ignored this kind of subjugation and hired a faculty member whose poetry spoke out against the racial status quo. Nevertheless, while he was subversive in hiring Alexander, Reddix still feared white outrage and used his presidency for accommodation. As Favors' research reveals, Reddix partially allowed for an environment that allowed limited student activism.

Favors writes,

“But [Reddix's] tenure had also been marked by the hiring of politically conscious faculty such as Walker, the establishment of a venue that welcomed Black activists and radicals from across the country, and the creation of a platform where students expressed their frustrations with and defiance against Jim Crow. Nevertheless, Reddix understood that actions such as the overt student protests occurring right outside his door were wholly impossible if the institution were to stay in favor with the white power structure that controlled its tenuous destiny.”⁸¹

This research reveals that Black administrators like Reddix cultivated a campus environment that is not easily understood as inherently resistant or accommodating. Reddix has been written as a one dimensional enemy to Black advancement, letting fear of white reprisal strip him of his agency. His leadership style should still be read as in line with Black conservatism, but this understanding reaffirms the complexity of Black administrators in the Jim Crow higher education system.

⁸¹ Favors, “The Greatest Art is Propaganda,” 123.

Reddix not only cultivated a complicated accommodationist environment, but Alexander has also critiqued the systemic sexism that she encountered as a faculty member at Jackson State College. Alexander was a prize poet for the college, but her time under Reddix was thorny. Jelani Favors' article, "The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda: The Fascinating and Tragic Life of Margaret Walker Alexander," which is a historical study of Margaret Walker Alexander's time at JSC from 1949 to the early 1960s, captures this oxymoronic era as both fascinating and tragic.⁸² The racially suppressive environment of Jim Crow Mississippi aided in this, but Alexander was highly critical of the faculty and administration, namely President Reddix, in the way that they treated her. As the primary breadwinner of her family, Alexander understood herself as vulnerable to racist, sexist, and classist exploitation. Not too long after she was hired in 1949, Alexander observed, "For nine months everything went well and members of the administration kept saying they were honored to have me, until I moved my family and my furniture."⁸³ Alexander continues, "They saw that my husband was sick and disabled from the war, that I had these children under six years of age, that I was poor and had to work, I was no longer their honored poet, but a defenseless Black woman to be harassed."⁸⁴ Alexander wrote this essay, "Black Women in Academia," in 1972 and originally presented it as a speech at the National Association of Black Behavioral Scientists in Atlanta. In it, she ties her oppression as an educator to the oppression of her mother and sisters who were also highly trained, well-educated Black women educators who were worked tirelessly and underpaid.

Despite Alexander's efforts in directing a literary festival, writing occasional poetry for events, producing a pageant, and developing a successful humanities program, Alexander was

⁸² Ibid, 111.

⁸³ Alexander, "Black Women in Academia," 30.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 30.

still headed by a male faculty member—“not a man with superior training, rank, or ability, just a man.”⁸⁵ Even though Reddix had an intimate understanding of the inferior educational standards for Black people in Mississippi, he still became insulted by Alexander’s critiques. As Alexander shares, “That summer the president openly attacked me in a faculty meeting by accusing me of talking about the low standards of education in Mississippi. He told me in so many words that if I didn’t like what went on in Mississippi I could find myself another job. He ranted and raved so, I was close to tears...”⁸⁶ Maybe Reddix’s nine years of leadership at Mississippi’s only public Black higher education institution and the financial, ideological and political struggles he endured with the Mississippi legislature made him feel Alexander’s comments were premature and naive. What this does reveal, nevertheless, is that Reddix did not grant free reign for this very public artist and scholar to speak freely if it seemed to undermine his work. According to Alexander, the rest of her tenure under Reddix was hostile, and he and other faculty undermined her at every turn. She admits that had it not been for her motherhood and her disabled husband, she would have quit her job. This further exacerbates the point about the intersections of Black patriarchy and capitalism on Alexander’s labor, gender, and her husband’s disability.

Jacob L. Reddix was president at Jackson State College for more than two and a half decades. During his tenure he encountered blatant white racism and saw his college undergo major changes and challenges. Under his tenure, JSC underwent three name changes, but it also saw expansion and became the largest Black higher education institution in Mississippi. While he has traditionally been written as an accommodationist, scholars such as Jelani Favors and Joy Ann Williamson have called on scholars to question deeper the racism that Black university presidents endured and the subversive politics of university presidents, Reddix specifically.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 30.

However, this nuanced understanding of Reddix does not greatly challenge the historical understanding of him as a Black conservative who tried to ward off activism and paternalistically control his faculty and students. Under Reddix's tenure, Alexander felt like she was suffocating as an academic. As a Black mother and primary breadwinner, she experienced exploitation at the intersections of her race, class, and gender—oppressions of which she was vividly aware. When President-Elect John A. Peoples, protégé of Reddix, reached out to Alexander in 1966, it was with this awareness of Alexander's experiences, but also as an outlook for a better college that propelled Peoples to redefine Alexander's relationship to the college's president. The Peoples presidency was a presidency wrought with tragedy and success, right in the midst of the Black Power Movement. Instead of shunning campus activism outright, though, Peoples used the office of the presidency to adopt certain tenants of the Black Campus Movement and contain student rebellion as best he could.

The Mississippi Movement and Student Rebellion

On Thursday, May 11, 1967, the *Jackson Daily News* headline reported “JSC Students Get Control of Area.”⁸⁷ This massive student uprising was reported as over a thousand students mobilized after the death of a student and civil rights activist, Benjamin Brown, was shot by the militarized Jackson Police Force.⁸⁸ Jackson State College students and nonstudents, often referred to as “corner boys,” engaged in protests by throwing rocks, looting, and burning police barricades. These student protestors came face to face with Jackson Mayor Allen Thompson, who had developed a career of stifling Black demonstrations in the city, orchestrated mass arrests of peaceful protestors in the early 1960s, and militarized the police force. Students

⁸⁷ Mike Smith, *Jackson Daily News*. “JSC Students Get Control of Area,” May 11, 1967, Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

⁸⁸ *Ibid*; Spofford, *Lynch Street*, Ch. 1.

blocked Lynch Street, the major street that white motorists used to get to the downtown white business district, which split Jackson State College in half. As JSC junior Leola McGregory announced to newsmen, “Students are not going to classes. There is no traffic that is going to come through J. R. Lynch Street.”⁸⁹ J.R. Lynch Street was named after John Roy Lynch, a Black congressman during the Reconstruction period. Lynch Street was a major site for racial hostility. White motorists often yelled racial slurs to Black students as they passed. Black students, in turn, often met them with profanity and pelted their cars with rocks and bottles as they drove by. On February 3, 1964, three years earlier, one white motorist hit Mamie Ballard, a student at JSC, as she was crossing the street. The police allowed the motorist to keep driving.⁹⁰ Because Lynch Street was a site for continuous racial clashing, the Benjamin Brown rebellion was not unlikely. After blocking off Lynch Street, students decided to march west towards downtown. Eventually, the downtown business district was overtaken by rebellious student protesters from JSC, Tougaloo College, and nonstudents. They engaged in a tug-of-war-like protest between the white-led municipal leadership and the Black students.⁹¹ Eventually, Mayor Thompson was able to talk students down and disperse the crowd without agitating them further or orchestrating a mass arrest.⁹²

Jackson State College had been affected by the new wave of Black nationalist organizing spreading all over the nation. Rooted in the Watts Rebellion of 1965 and other urban uprisings, nationwide student protests, the ideology and death of Malcolm X, and the Black Power rhetoric of the “March Against Fear,” JSC students began to reject the strategies of the CRM as the

⁸⁹ *Jackson Daily News*. “Mayor Confronts Students,” May 11, 1967, Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

⁹⁰ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, Ch. 1.

⁹¹ *Jackson Daily News*. “Mayor Confronts Students,” May 11, 1967.

⁹² *Ibid.*

singular, morally superior, most effective strategy for societal transformation and Black liberation. As Ibram Kendi describes, “[T]he CRM to primarily affect the moral conscious of white America to advance African Americans—or *white suasion*—gave way to *Black suasion* to develop the moral, cultural, and political consciousness of African Americans toward the necessity of Black unity, power, and agency through the Black Power Movement (BPM).”⁹³ President John A. Peoples, an alumnus of Jackson State College who was called a “radical” while advocating for students’ rights, became president in this newly politicized campus environment. His time as a student, however, was not defined by student rebellion or this new wave of Black nationalist organizing. Similarly, Margaret Walker Alexander, after returning to Mississippi from a sabbatical with a doctorate degree and a newly published book, was also affected by and impacted this Black nationalist environment, especially after her good friend and neighbor Medgar Evers was assassinated. Before this scholarly and artistic hiatus, Alexander primarily published poetry and essays that encouraged Black people to eliminate racial and classist subjugation. However, in this new Black nationalist environment of the Black Campus Movement, Alexander began a new chapter in her career as a scholar-artist. As a professor and artist, Alexander critiqued the historic subjugation of Black educational institutions and advocated for Black liberation pedagogy, theology, and activism in her artistry and cultivated a methodologically driven interdisciplinary program of Black Studies. In addition, Alexander expanded her critique of racialized capitalism to also lament American imperialism, police militarism, and issues related to Black women.

Emmitt Till was lynched in Money, Mississippi in 1955. Till was fourteen years of age. His death sparked a fever in Black youth’s political consciousness and made them starkly aware

⁹³ Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*, 67.

that white racial violence would not discriminate against them based on their age. John Dittmer describes this group of youth activists in SNCC and CORE in the 1960s as the “Emmitt Till Generation.”⁹⁴ Historians have identified Till’s lynching in 1955, the same year as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Personal reflections of Till’s murder have given sustenance to this argument. For instance, Anne Moody, in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* writes, “Not only did I enter high school with a new name [from Esse to Anne], but also with a completely new insight into the life of Negroes in Mississippi. I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmitt Till was killed.”⁹⁵ Moody’s reflections continue to discuss a scene of young Black high school aged boys and girls discussing the racial, gender, and sexual politics of Till’s murder. In Moody’s narrative, Till’s murder provided a catalyst for these Black youth to develop a political consciousness around the death of a Black boy their age within their state and relate those circumstances back to themselves. This awakening is illuminated in Moody’s reflection: “Before Emmitt Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was Black.”⁹⁶

Emmitt Till’s lynching provided the psychological stimulus for a generation of young Black activists to get involved in civil rights organizing. However, as Jelani Favors’ scholarship reveals, some Black student activists were engaging in political consciousness raising and activism on the campus of Jackson State College in the 1940s and 1950s, before the death of Emmitt Till.⁹⁷ Organizers and educators made intentional decisions to educate, organize, and politicize Black youth and provide spaces for their development. Anne Moody’s political

⁹⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 58.

⁹⁵ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 127.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 132.

⁹⁷ Favors, “The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda,” 113.

awareness may have begun with a spark, but her school teacher, Mrs. Rice nurtured Moody's curiosity by providing her information and inviting Moody to her home for further political education about racial strife in Mississippi.⁹⁸ Similarly, through studying the student newspaper, *Blue and White Flash*, Favors reveals that students were being exposed to scholar-activists and radicals at Jackson State College. Mainly, students were exposed to these thinkers through campus activities, forums, and other events. In addition, students were provided explicit social movement training. As Jelani details, "Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the campus paper was littered with reports of students attending radical youth conferences hosted by the Southern Negro Youth Congress, organizing their own campus organizations aimed towards the goal of addressing and deconstructing white supremacy, and demanding that America be held accountable for its inability to reconcile the hypocrisies embodied in its professional liberty."⁹⁹

John A. Peoples, future sixth president of Jackson State, entered the college in 1947, two years before Margaret Walker Alexander was hired, in this politicized student environment. Peoples had previously served as a marine in World War II before attending the institution and had desired to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the California Institute of Technology. Peoples was unable to attend these institutions immediately because priority went to in-state students. As Lelia Rhodes informs: "With hundreds of other veterans also clamoring to enter these schools on the GI Bill, however, education authorities limited entrance to in-state veterans. Out-of-state veterans would have to wait at least two years to become eligible to register at MIT and CIT."¹⁰⁰ Peoples was advised by his high school principal to enter Jackson State to study mathematics under the mentorship of Dean Henry T. Sampson. In addition to

⁹⁸ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 134-135.

⁹⁹ Favors, "The Greatest Art Is the Greatest Propaganda," 119.

¹⁰⁰ Rhodes, *Jackson State University*, 145.

studying mathematics education, Peoples also became a student athlete and was elected president of the Student Government Association (SGA) in 1950. Peoples' experiences as military veteran, athlete, and student leader provided him with a unique set of skills and repertoire to negotiate for student rights and funding. Payne highlights the tenacity of veterans in the pursuit of change: "Like their predecessors from the First World War, some of them returned to the South with a new sense of the proper order of things. All across the South [Black] veterans tried to register and protested attempts to keep them from doing so."¹⁰¹ As SGA President, Peoples advocated for student athletes who had been lumped in with other upperclassmen who were engaging in hazing of freshmen. He successfully advocated for the re-admittance of students who were wrongly reprimanded. In addition, when the college began granting athletic scholarships, Peoples also negotiated with President Reddix to ensure that military veterans were also provided opportunities to be funded.¹⁰²

It was this advocacy that intimidated some of the college's leadership. As a student leader, Peoples was branded as a radical, and some in the college's leadership feared he was radicalizing other students. Most notably, Odessa Howard Waters sought to minimize and contain student activity. Waters, who was Dean of Students, was aware of Peoples' students' rights advocacy and disapproved of him as a "persistent radical."¹⁰³ Dean Waters antagonized students with morally conservative behavior regulations, of which students vocally disagreed. Peoples, along with other students, in 1950, gathered to draft a resolution and brought it to President Reddix demanding that students be respected for their moral character, that policies directed at students be redrafted, and that upper class students' social privileges be protected.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 23.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 147.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

That these students engaged in activity to redress paternalistic policies at their institution while also advocating for fair treatment through the college's ordinances and procedures shows that students had been intimately concerned with campus alterations. As students, they also had a clear understanding of state and federal education policy and demanded that they be provided with those benefits. The college's administration and faculty were wary of white backlash and sought to protect students and themselves from the consequences. They also mentored, encouraged, and opposed this student leadership. Some, like President Reddix who has been characterized as an unflinching administrator in social movement historiography, were open to negotiations with students. They were also cultivating the skills that these future civic leaders and activists used to challenge other oppressive policies and practices both inside and outside the educational sphere. The Black faculty and administration were diverse and complicated at Jackson State college. They were progressive in some areas, and in others, they were conservative—contradictory, even as individuals.

Jackson State College, for students like John A. Peoples, was a movement center. As Joy Ann Williamson states, "Movement centers, including Black churches, political organizations, and colleges, maintained vital resources for sustaining the Black freedom struggle. Logistically, they were institutions with a pre-organized group of constituents, established leaders, media outlets, networks, and meeting spaces."¹⁰⁵ These collegiate movement centers existed as both a training grounds for civic engagement and a reminder of disenfranchisement as citizens. Students were encouraged to engage in the political process—running for office, voting, drafting student government legislation, and challenge campus codes while simultaneously being barred from local, state, and national politics. Students were fully aware of this "paradoxical situation."¹⁰⁶ As

¹⁰⁵ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 34.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

Williamson adds, “The incongruity of encouraging political participation on campus but not in American society was not lost on Black students. Nor was the fact that Black colleges practiced a paternalistic control over their students, including their dress, personal conduct, co-educational activities, and ability to leave the campus, that was unmatched at most secular white institutions.”¹⁰⁷ The practice and demand for participatory democracy and proper representation on campus was a precursor to Black students’ demands for participation in American society.

Faculty and administration also shaped these movement centers, and they sought to change their paradoxical situation, also. In 1943, Alexander published an article in *Common Ground* that illustrated that she was intimately aware of the political situation of Black people in America.¹⁰⁸ Alexander had the privilege—a right that Mississippi Black citizens had been consistently fighting for since their disenfranchisement—to cast a ballot in the Presidential election while living in Chicago. Alexander understood voting to be “effective in the balance of power” for Black people in the North, East, and the Mid-West.¹⁰⁹ However, it was not lost upon her that due to both race and class, both Blacks and poor whites were being unfairly disenfranchised and were encouraged to hate one another. Alexander writes, “As soon as I began working in close contact with whites, I discovered startling things peculiar to both racial groups, all adding up to one main conclusion: that whites suffer psychologically from the problem of race prejudice as much as Negroes.”¹¹⁰ In addition, race had a direct connection to history and politics for Alexander: “I began to dig into the historical background of politics in America, to read the record where Negroes were concerned. I began to see parallels. When the thirteen

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 39.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., “Out of the Shadow,” in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 3-9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 7.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 7.

colonies revolted, they revolted on the premise that taxation without representation is tyranny. Yet that is precisely what the Negro suffered in the South still.” Alexander’s analysis of race and class politics followed her from print into the classroom. Being a mother, Alexander admitted in “How I Told My Child about Race,” that she was forced out of cowardice and complacency to teach her child about race. Having Black children in the Jim Crow South forced Alexander to tear down the fantasy of not addressing racial injustice and teach the truth.¹¹¹

Just as Favours explored student publications to reveal the politicized campus environment at Jackson State College, studying Alexander’s writings in the *Common Ground* and the *Negro Digest*, written in 1943 and 1951, respectively, reveal the political epistemology of Alexander as an educator on a Black campus in the South. However, unlike her journals, which were private, personal, and were probably unseen by many of her contemporaries, Alexander’s published material was public and circulated among Black readers, students and professors alike. Her critical assertions about race and the duty of Black people to intelligently and responsibly challenge racist and classist oppression aided Black political consciousness. Alexander merged her roles as an educator and an essayist on these public platforms to engage the emotional and psychological consequences of racism. She was critical of the desire of Black people to shy away from conversations of race and segregation, even on the Black college campus. She writes,

“Living as we do, deep in Dixie, facing every day not merely the question of race but the problems of Jim Crow or segregation, we have a tendency to build an unreal world of fantasy... We live on a college campus and here in a completely Black world we often feel a kind of escape. We build a tower in which we rationalize our way of life. These become our protective coloring: the poker face, the masked eyes held straight ahead, the deaf ears, and the silent tongue.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., “How I Told My Child about Race,” in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 11.

¹¹² Alexander, “How I Told My Child about Race,” 11.

Alexander's critique of Black people's escapism was not a critique of the existence Black institutions themselves. Alexander saw these movement centers as vital to the nurture of Black youth and the elimination of racist and classist oppression. Instead, Alexander argued that Black people have a political responsibility to challenge racism and not turn a blind eye to it—especially not to create a dissonance around race. This same critique of Black political apathy can be found in her poem, "For My People," published in 1942. She writes, "For my people blundering and groping and floundering in/the dark of churches and schools and clubs and/societies, associations and councils and committees and/conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and/devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches..."¹¹³ In this stanza, Alexander raises a critique of multiple Black institutions that have been under attack by "leeches" who have used these institutions to further their own goals. C. Leigh McInnis also makes a similar analysis of Alexander's poem. McInnis contends that this stanza of "For My People" details "the dysfunction or misguided efforts of African Americans."¹¹⁴ McInnis concludes, "For Dr. Alexander the problem with Black life is not the institutions of Black life but the misuse of those institutions. In stanza eight, she is not denouncing the institutions but the poor use of them."¹¹⁵ For McInnis it is important to recognize that Alexander held membership and was active in multiple Black institutions: "As a professor of a university, an officer of a church and several social organizations, and an active delegate in a political party, Dr. Alexander often waged war to make those institutions do and be more than status symbols."¹¹⁶ In the 1940s

¹¹³ Margaret Walker, "For My People," in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 7.

¹¹⁴ C. Leigh McInnis, "'For My People' as the Fulfillment of Margaret Walker Alexander's Literary Manifesto," presented on March 26, 2015, Medgar Evers Library, 4215 Medgar Evers Boulevard, Jackson, MS 39213-5210.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and 1950s, Alexander waged war to make these Black institutions, especially JSC, an “interstitial space” for critical engagement in race and class politics.

Within the historical frame of the BCM, Alexander’s political advocacy challenges assumptions about Alexander’s activist and intellectual politics as being divested from the political environment and a casual observer of the Mississippi and national movements. Her life before the late sixties ascribes political agency and context to Alexander’s political and educational goals. Unfortunately, Alexander did take a break as a public intellectual. The 1950s and early 1960s for Alexander was defined by her goal to finish her novel, *Jubilee*. In 1953, a year before *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed separate and unequal schools—a decision that white southerners actively resisted—Alexander was awarded a Ford Fellowship to continue her primary source research.¹¹⁷ On *Brown v. Board* Dittmer writes, “The impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* extended far beyond the question of the future of public schools. For Mississippi whites the U.S. Supreme Court decision had been a wake up call, and preserving the southern way of life soon assumed all the trappings of a holy crusade.”¹¹⁸ During this so-called holy crusade, Alexander was granted fifteen months off from teaching responsibilities. Alexander’s rigorous scholarly research became a priority, and she traveled from Durham, North Carolina to New Haven, Connecticut in order to find archival materials that would help her accurately contextualize her historical novel. She returned to teaching in September of 1954. Also, Alexander had her fourth child during this time, and her husband, Alex, underwent multiple surgeries over the course of the next seven years, which caused her to put away her novel and effectively kept her from being able to publish anything.¹¹⁹ By 1961, Alexander also

¹¹⁷ Brown, *Song of My Life*, 54.

¹¹⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 41.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *Song of My Life*, 56.

decided to return to the University of Iowa to finish her novel. When she realized that she would not be able to teach and finish her doctorate program, she took a two-year leave.

During this period from 1954-1962, the Mississippi movement developed in an entirely new way. Specifically, the movement began to employ mass direct action protests as a strategy to challenge the morality and constitutionality of Jim Crow segregation. Because of the organizing efforts of multiple activist organizations across the nation, this direct action movement applied the philosophy of nonviolence in order to challenge discrimination in public accommodations. Through the NAACP Youth Councils, CORE, the Freedom Rides, and SNCC, students and nonstudents were provided multiple opportunities to challenge Jim Crow segregation. In Jackson, the NAACP, specifically through the organizing efforts of Medgar Evers, had organized boycotts against the downtown white business district. According to Dittmer, "...Evers enlisted 200 students from Black colleges in the Jackson area to distribute handbills announcing an Easter boycott of Capital Street stores to protest poor treatment of Negro customers, failure of sales personnel to use courtesy titles, and refusal of store owners to hire Black clerks."¹²⁰ Students from JSC, Campbell College, and Tougaloo all participated in the boycott.¹²¹ Each of the Black colleges' presidents knew of the boycott but made sure to cite that students were acting of their own accord. President Reddix told the *Times-Picayune*, "We have no part in it. Insofar as I know Jackson State is not in any way participating, either officially or unofficially. No faculty member or student is co-operating either officially or unofficially."¹²² Reddix was not adverse to participating in boycotts, however. He was a part of a cohort of

¹²⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 86.

¹²¹ Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom), SCR ID # 2-135-0-3-1-1-1.

¹²² *Times-Picayune*, "Boycott Scheduled as Jackson Protest," April 9, 1961, Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

boycotters with the Mississippi Improvement Association of Students, which was supported by students and faculty at Jackson State—Joyce Ladner, Dorie Ladner, Emmett Burns, and faculty members Rose E. McCoy, Tellis B. Ellis, and Jane McAllister.¹²³

Ideally, Evers and Mississippi NAACP Youth Council members supported a direct action protest, similar to the sit-in performed by the Greensboro students in February of 1960, but many in the MS NAACP leadership, led by Black conservative state president C. R. Darden, feared retaliation from whites. However, after adult NAACP members organized a direct action protest in the segregated Biloxi beach—Black people were not permitted on the beach—Darden’s anti-direct action stance was challenged, and he was soon replaced by Aaron Henry. As Aaron Henry biographer Minion Morrison describes, “Henry’s election presaged a generational shift in leadership and approach. He and his youthful ally, Medgar Evers, exploited every opportunity to challenge the system, channeling the aggression and passion bubbling up from the grassroots. Dubbed “militants” by their white detractors, this younger group became the most influential interpreters of issues within the Black community.”¹²⁴

With this shift in leadership and a strategic plan from the national NAACP office, Evers organized a nonviolent direct action protest to desegregate the Jackson Municipal Library (also called the Jackson Public Library). Nine Tougaloo students, dubbed “The Tougaloo 9” participated in a read-in at the segregated Jackson Public Library. The students, Albert Lee Cook, Evelyn Pierce, Janice L. Jackson, Joseph Jackson, Ethel Swayer, Jeraldine Edwards, James Bradford, Meredith Anding, Jr., and Albert Lassiter, were all arrested and remained in jail

¹²³ Mississippi Improvement Association of Students, March 23, 1961, Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

¹²⁴ Minion Morrison, *Aaron Henry of Mississippi: Inside Agitator*. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2015): 55.

until they were released on bond.¹²⁵ In support of the demonstration and in protest of the arrest, Jackson State College students and sisters, Joyce and Dorie Ladner organized a sympathy prayer. Nearly seven hundred people attended, including James Meredith.¹²⁶ Sovereignty Commission spies reported, “[T]he students at Jackson College (sic) demonstrated their disapproval of the arrest of these students by gathering in front of the campus library at the Jackson College, sang hymns, prayed, and chanted “We Want Freedom.”¹²⁷ President Jacob L. Reddix broke up the demonstration with the aid of the Jackson Police Department. Several students gathered along Lynch Street afterwards. One told a staff writer with the *Clarion-Ledger*, “They haven’t seen anything yet. This will go on until we have freedom.”¹²⁸ As Dittmer describes, “The next day Jackson State students boycotted classes and staged an illegal rally on campus, after which a group of fifty began to march to the city jail, where the Tougaloo students, still in custody, were meeting with their college president, Daniel Beittel, who came to demonstrate his support.”¹²⁹ Police beat them with clubs, sprayed tear gas, and unleashed police dogs on them. Later that night, the NAACP “held a meeting at a Negro Baptist Church on Florence Street in Jackson. This church was extremely crowded for this meeting, in fact, several Negroes could not get in.”¹³⁰ JSC had a mix of retaliatory protests and proactive activism, as displayed in the organizing efforts of Medgar Evers, Joyce and Dorie Ladner, and James Meredith. After the student protest at JSC in support of the Tougaloo 9, President Reddix expelled Joyce and Dorie Ladner and

¹²⁵ M. Curry, “Sit-in demonstration at the Jackson Municipal Library by students at Tougaloo Christian College, Jackson, Miss.” April 1, 1961, Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

¹²⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 88; Spofford, *Lynch Street*.

¹²⁷ Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom), SCR ID # 2-55-2-3-2-1-1.

¹²⁸ Wallace Dabbs, “Jackson State College Students Stage Protest,” *Clarion-Ledger*, March 28, 1961. Sovereignty Commission Online, (http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom).

¹²⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 88.

¹³⁰ SCR ID # 2-55-2-3-2-1-1.

transferred to Tougaloo. James Meredith challenged segregation at the University of Mississippi and attempted to transfer to the all-white institution in 1961. A similar desegregation attempt was tried by Clyde Kennard at Mississippi Southern College years earlier.¹³¹ Each of these protests were met with retaliation from the Jackson Police force and other state police agents in order to repress Black protests.

The protests in Jackson in the early sixties had a uniquely nonviolent characteristic. This was because nonviolence was the stratagem advocated by the major organizations in the Mississippi movement. However, nonviolence was not universally accepted or practiced, even amongst strategists like Medgar Evers, who organized boycotts and direct action protests but also carried a gun. Personally, many Black citizens were armed and practiced armed resistance. Akinyele Umoja writes that armed resistance is “individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other goals of insurgent political action and in defense of human rights.”¹³² Umoja outlines six distinctive forms of armed resistance: 1) armed self-defense, 2) retaliatory violence, 3) spontaneous rebellion, 4) guerilla warfare, 5) armed vigilance/enforcement, and 6) armed struggle. The post-assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963 saw many JSC students participating in spontaneous rebellions. The nonviolent protests served as a precursor to the student uprisings that followed. These student uprisings were defined by a new Black Power insurgency that was spreading throughout the nation. As Umoja details in *We Will Shoot Back*, revolutionary Black nationalism began to spread into SNCC leadership in Greenwood as early as 1964 through an organization called the Revolutionary Action Movement.¹³³ Located between

¹³¹ Robert Luckett, *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015): 110-112.

¹³² Akinyele Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*. (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 7.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 89.

fundamental Black nationalism and militant reform, the Revolutionary Action Movement “saw armed struggle as the primary means by which Black liberation would come about.”¹³⁴ While the Revolutionary Action Movement believed in creating a Black army to engage in guerrilla warfare to seize state control, it was ultimately defined by its rejection of bourgeois reformism, its opposition to integration, and its advocacy of Black self-governance. Most importantly, as Umoja illustrates, when the Revolutionary Action Movement came to Greenwood, they found that armed resistance was already being practiced by Black citizens.

The Revolutionary Action Movement’s articulation of its revolutionary nationalist ideology spread throughout SNCC and CORE. Pervasive white violence and the murder of Medgar Evers and Freedom Summer activists Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney hastened the decline of nonviolence as the sole viable strategy for Black liberation. By June 1964, SNCC and CORE both had national debates over armed resistance. As Umoja explains, “For the strategy of nonviolence to work in Mississippi, the federal government would have to intervene with force to provide security from the forces of White supremacist terrorism.”¹³⁵ Black activists soon learned that they would have to protect themselves and not rely on federal protection.

This debate over nonviolence and armed resistance was compounded by the militarization of the Jackson Police Force. Jackson Mayor Allen Thompson, fearing widespread Black direct action protests during Freedom Summer ordered more equipment for police. As Tim Spofford illustrates, “To meet this challenge, the highway patrol’s ranks doubled, and the Jackson Police Department went on a shopping spree. Mayor Allen Thompson saw to it that the police got new troop carriers, two half-ton searchlight trucks, and three trucks to transport

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 119.

protesters. New tear-gas masks were ordered, along with two hundred new shotguns.”¹³⁶

However, the highlight of Mayor Thompson’s shopping spree was the purchase of a bullet-proff armored van that had gunports for firing tear-gas—a vehicle notoriously called “Thompson’s Tank.” In 1964, after a white motorist ran Mamie Ballard over with a car, students engaged in armed resistance protests by throwing bottles and bricks at white motorists passing by. In addition, the Jackson Police Force, with its new equipment, came to campus armed with their shotguns. Three young people were injured, two of which were Jackson State students.¹³⁷ A year later, massive Black urban uprisings, starting with the Watts Rebellion, erupted, ushering in the Black Power Movement. Malcolm X, a Black nationalist martyr whose unique ideology informed much of the Black Power ideology, was also assassinated in 1965.¹³⁸

When Margaret Walker Alexander returned to Jackson State College with her dissertation in hand, she was returning to a city and a campus which had dramatically played out a racial struggle. Alexander’s 1942 poem “For My People” cast a looming shadow over the rebellious spirit of the Jackson movement. She writes in the last stanza, “Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a/ bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second/ generation full of courage issue forth; let a people/ loving freedom come to growth.”¹³⁹ Alexander knew, twenty years before the tense Jackson movement, that in order for a radical transformation of the racial state to occur, violent, bloody confrontation by a courageous generation would need to clash with the old order. Similarly, in “Delta” she writes, “...our blood eats through our veins with the terrible destruction/ of radium in our bones and rebellion in our brains/ and we wish no longer to rest.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, Ch. 1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, Ch. 1.

¹³⁸ Kendi, *Black Campus Movement*, 73.

¹³⁹ Walker, “For My People,” 7.

¹⁴⁰ Walker, “Delta,” 17-18.

Alexander's poetry advocated a Black insurgency. She understood the rage and humiliation that Black people suffering racial and classist subjugation, especially in the South, endured, and she knew that Black people would violently clash with the system. Similarly, Alexander's novel, *Jubilee*, cannot be divested from the movement. The characters contested the relationship between war, peace, and freedom in race relations. Furthermore, as Melissa Walker points out in "Down from the Mountaintop," Randall Ware's character, at the end of the book, espoused more of a separatist position.¹⁴¹ Though every character did not embody the same ideologies, Alexander's consideration of these discourses situated her novel within the ideological debate over the proper strategies for Black liberation.

Alexander admitted in an interview with John Griffin Jones that she actually left Jackson in the early 1960s because she could not pick a side on the demonstrations taking place in Jackson; moreover, she knew that supporting her students might lead to her being fired and saying that she supported the administration would lead to students boycotting her classes.¹⁴² However, it was during her time in Iowa that Medgar Evers was assassinated and the four little girls in Birmingham were murdered. Returning back to Mississippi, Alexander's mission as an educator and poet was reinvigorated, and she was finally ready to choose sides. In 1966, the year that "Black Power" became a popularized slogan, Alexander published the poem *Ballad of the Free* with Broadside Press. In *Ballad of the Free*, Alexander recovered the insurgency of Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and Toussaint L'Ouverture.¹⁴³ Alexander sought to use history and poetry as a weapon to energize Black revolutionary potential. Similarly, for John A. Peoples' inauguration, Alexander wrote for this very public, celebratory event, a poetic history,

¹⁴¹Melissa Walker, "Down from the Mountaintop," in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 62.

¹⁴² Brown, *Song of My Life*, 58-59.

¹⁴³ Walker, *Ballad of the Free*, 60.

which situated the Black educational tradition within the violence of slavery and lynching. St. Clair Drake, who attended the inauguration, in a handwritten letter to Alexander, celebrated the “Ode on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Sixth President of Jackson State College” as “magnificent—courageous, too—given the occasion.”¹⁴⁴ This ode symbolized both a new relationship between Alexander and Peoples, but it also ushered in a “bird of paradise... cardinal bird of truth,” a phoenix that would burn away the old order of ignorance and oppression and birth a new tradition of Black scholarship.¹⁴⁵ When President Peoples approached Alexander about the Black Studies program—a program he imagined would only celebrate Black achievements—in April of 1968, she saw it as an opportunity to use reputable scholarship and cultural events to attack the ignorance of the nation, but also as a way to develop Black scholars who would be prepared to use their critical thinking skills and methodological training “to change our world and our society from what it is to what it ought to be.”¹⁴⁶ The university space, which she saw as the “generator of ideas,” was the ideal space to develop such a program and was the most reasonable space for this scholar-artist to use her pedagogy to advance the movement.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ St. Clair Drake to Margaret Walker Alexander, 11 March 1968, Series I Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁴⁵ Walker, “Ode on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Sixth President of Jackson State College,” 111.

¹⁴⁶ Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, ed., “The Challenge of the 1970s to the Black Scholar,” in *On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 183-184.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 185.

**5 PROFESSIONALIZING BLACK STUDIES AT JACKSON STATE COLLEGE: THE
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY, LIFE, AND CULTURE OF
BLACK PEOPLE**

“The Black teacher, particularly the southern Black woman teacher, has been the first positive image some poor African American children have known. Instilling a good self-concept of worth in the Black child is the most important task their teacher can accomplish.”—Margaret Walker Alexander, “Tribute to Black Teachers” (1975)

On July 17, 1973, Margaret Walker Alexander, Director of the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People at Jackson State College, wrote a letter to Sara Webster Fabio, inviting her to attend the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival to celebrate the bicentennial of the first Black woman to publish poetry in America.¹⁴⁸ Fabio was an associate professor of African and African-American Literature at Oberlin College in Ohio. Along with Fabio, the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, held at Jackson State College November 4th through the 7th, included nineteen other Black women poets, professors, and librarians, including Johari Amini, who was lecturing in Black literature at the University of Illinois, Mari Evans, who was Writer-in-Residence and Assistant Professor of Black Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, Carolyn Rodgers, who taught African-American Literature at Columbia University, Sonia Sanchez, who helped to shape Black Studies at San Francisco State University, and Alice Walker, who had served as Writer-in-Residence at Jackson State and taught courses in Black Literature and Black Women’s Literature. Other notable artists present were Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Marion Alexander. Five years into the founding of

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Walker Alexander to Sarah Fabio, 17 July 1973, Series I Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

Black Studies at Jackson State College, the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival signals the Black feminist genealogies of Black Studies. However, it also illustrates the collaborative effort of scholarly development of Black Studies at Jackson State. At no time was Margaret Walker Alexander alone in developing Black Studies locally or nationally. She was an observer of the student movements happening around Jackson State and nationally. Collaborating with President John A. Peoples and faculty, staff, and students at Jackson State, Alexander brought together programs, developed coursework at the college, and partnered with national scholars who laid the groundwork for the scholarly concerns, dimensions, and goals of Black Studies.

Alexander's vision of Black Studies at Jackson State was Black humanist in orientation. Describing the Institute on the program for the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, Alexander writes, "The Institute began September 1968, with six year-long courses and has grown to more than twenty offerings this year with an increase of faculty and staff personnel from six to twelve. What is more significant, however, is the philosophy behind the Institute which we regard as humanistic and in its best application seeks to inform our entire College of the vast reservoir of Black humanism in an effort to arrive at an understanding of common humanity for all mankind."¹⁴⁹ Alexander's definition of Black humanism can be found in her essay, "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature" which was published in 1970. Summarized, Black humanism is a tradition tied to "Black Africa and to everything racially indigenous to Black people and nonwhite cultures everywhere in the world."¹⁵⁰ Black humanism is "permeated with ideas of revolt against artifice, sterility, self-consciousness, contrived morality, and

¹⁴⁹ Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival Program, 4 November 1973, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁵⁰ Margaret Walker Alexander and Maryemma Graham, ed., "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature," in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 122.

pseudonatural ethics.”¹⁵¹ It is reflexive of the Black experience and Black people who are oppressed but refused to be suppressed; and finally, it seeks change through reeducation towards a “new [Black] humanism.”¹⁵² Alexander’s Black humanism centers on that idea that any analysis of Black people should be rooted in Africa and had to treat Black subjects from their perspectives, idioms, and resistance ideologies and experiences. Further, Alexander recognized that though Black people have been oppressed, they have not been completely dehumanized. Minrose Gwin defines Alexander’s humanism as tripartite connective threads: 1) as “a series of discursive affirmations of a creative “humanistic” vision”; 2) as “subversive disruption of racist ideology” this is “complexly gendered”; and 3) as an emphasis on “an Afrocentric heritage and vision as powerful sources of deconstruction and reconstruction of American culture.”¹⁵³

In her proposal for “An Institute for the Continuing Study of Negro History, Life, and Culture at Jackson State College,” Alexander rationalized the existence of the educational program to address “widespread ignorance on the part of both Black and white youth concerning History and cultural contributions of Black people.”¹⁵⁴ Alexander saw racism and oppression as cultural and spiritual ignorance and sought to use the Institute through the application of a Black humanist paradigm to educate ignorance away. The birth of Black Studies at Jackson State was designed to tackle white ignorance and was the epitome of the “cardinal bird of truth” that she wrote about in the “Ode” to the president.¹⁵⁵ While Alexander believed in the power of transforming white ignorance, she did not believe that Black Studies was solely for the purpose

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁵² Ibid, 122-130.

¹⁵³ Minrose Gwin, “The “Intricate Design” of Margaret Walker’s “Humanism”: Revolution, Vision, History,” in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 66.

¹⁵⁴ “An Institute for the Continuing Study of Negro History, Life, and Culture at Jackson State College,” 17 April 1968, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁵⁵ Walker, “Ode on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Sixth President of Jackson State College,” 111.

of white suasion. Partially, as expressed in the proposal, was to address issues of racial self-concept, identity, and alienation.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, in her 1969 essay, “The Challenge of the 1970s to the Black Scholar,” Alexander argues, “I believe it is an absolute necessity that we develop a whole generation of scholars and that they understand their obligation to Black people as we seek to change our world and our society from what it is to what it ought to be.”¹⁵⁷ That obligation to Black people is in the recognition of the humanity of Black people but also the problems that face Black people.

She advocated for a pedagogy that was critical of the political and economic circumstances of Black people. From 1968 to 1979 when she retired, Alexander implemented Black humanist pedagogical practices into the Institute for the Study of History, Life, and Culture of Black People by seeking to develop a methodologically driven program of Black Studies. The National Evaluative Conference of 1971, the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival 1973, the Summer Institute for Directed Research in Black Studies in 1973, Conference on the Plight of the Cities in 1977, and the Conference on African Affairs in 1977 all underlie traditions of using research and artistry in order to effect change in the community by using training in Black Studies. In this chapter, we look specifically at how Alexander utilized these programs and conferences to advance her educational paradigm of Black humanism to develop the parameters of Black Studies at Jackson State College.

Within its first year, the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People was designed to be an interdepartmental, interdisciplinary program. Alexander aimed for

¹⁵⁶ “An Institute for the Continuing Study of Negro History, Life, and Culture at Jackson State College,” 17 April 1968, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, ed., “The Challenge of the 1970s to the Black Scholar,” in *On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 183-184.

the Institute to be able to offer a minor with thirty (30) semester hours toward a major field. The coursework traversed history, literature, art, music, sociology, physical education, anthropology, psychology, religion, philosophy, and biology. In its genesis, particularly as it was proposed, the Black Studies Institute was designed to prepare students to work in a “multi-racial society” and world peace through a “knowledge and appreciation” of Black life and culture.¹⁵⁸ Much of this survey-like orientation can be attributed to John A. Peoples’ vision of Black Studies at Jackson State. In his autobiography, *To Survive and Thrive*, Peoples admits that he envisioned a Black Studies program that would consider Black people’s contributions throughout history in a variety of different areas. The hope was that “re-education” on Black contributions would erase racism, the belief of white superiority, and the myth of Black inadequacy. Evidence of this can be found in the nature of courses in the first semester of operation, like “History and Appreciation of the Negro in Art” and similarly, “History and Appreciation of the Negro in Music.”¹⁵⁹ However, as Alexander gained more autonomy over the program, she began to develop Black Studies beyond a contributionist approach to the study of Black people towards a program that leaned towards research and pragmatism in order to attack the issues of society.

However, while Alexander and Peoples did share different ideas about Black Studies at Jackson State, Peoples’ role in developing the trajectory of the Institute was instrumental. His administrative insight was beneficial towards the development of Black Studies at Jackson State. Communicating with Dean Wilbert Greenfield, President Peoples organized a “special conference” among faculty and staff at Jackson State in order to develop a successful program

¹⁵⁸ “An Institute for the Continuing Study of Negro History, Life, and Culture at Jackson State College,” 17 April 1968, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁵⁹ Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 5 July 1968. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

during the summer of 1968.¹⁶⁰ The summer conference was designed to make final decisions “regarding the general and specific subjects to be included, the content and intent of syllabi, course credit, articulation with existing curriculums, consultants and research persons, books and materials, and the involvement of students in planning and implementation.”¹⁶¹ By July 15, 1968, the Institute had developed a bulletin advertising its mission statement, course offerings and the interdisciplinary faculty. The Institute’s faculty included Charles Chikeka, who taught African History; Marcus Douyon, who taught Caribbean and Latin American History; Charles Holmes, who taught Black American History; Margaret Walker Alexander, who taught Literature; Aurelia Young, who taught Music; Lawrence Jones, who taught Art; and Kathryn Mosley, who taught Sociology and Anthropology.¹⁶² These faculty and the Institute, for good and bad, did encounter issues in scheduling and space. Revealed in the minutes of “The Black Studies Committee” were issues around “the jurisdiction of the Caribbean History Course,” the availability of space in Aurelia Young’s music class, and the overlap of timing of Black Studies course offerings which make it impossible for students to take multiple Black Studies courses in the same semester.¹⁶³ Though they ran into these problems, the Institute was seeing high student enrollment with each of the courses experiences twenty to fifty students per class. They were also able design and offer new courses in Black Studies and invite distinguished scholars to teach courses. William Brooks from Oklahoma State University was commissioned to teach a course on the psychology

¹⁶⁰ John A. Peoples to Wilbert Greenfield, 31 May 1968, Series I Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 15 July 1968. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁶³ Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 12 June 1970. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

of racism entitled “Psycho-Sociological Foundation of the Black Experience.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, poet Alice Walker was hired as an Artist-in-Residence and lecturer in the Institute in 1969 and held poetry readings in the JSC library.¹⁶⁵ In addition, the JSC library received books on the Black experience and began creating a listening center, with audio-visual films and tape recordings of various Black subjects.¹⁶⁶

The first move beyond the contributionist model towards a research oriented pedagogical model that Alexander employed throughout her tenure as director originated with the Summer Workshop in Black Studies for the High School Curriculum in 1969. It did not consciously resist contributionism as one of its objectives stated that it was designed to “stimulate an appreciation for the contributions of Black Americans to American life and culture.”¹⁶⁷ The workshop, led by H.S. Bingham, described as half “expository” and half “pedagogical,” was also designed to “provide information and materials as may enable and encourage participants to more qualify themselves to teach Black Studies” and to “present concepts basic to teaching and curriculum planning.”¹⁶⁸ Alexander’s aim to impact pedagogies on the high school level through teacher training speaks to an intention to transform local communities through Black Studies education. Surely, Alexander was thinking of using Black Studies education to improve the racial self-concept of Black youth in high schools. However, looking at this teacher training program reveals the roots of Alexander’s mission to equip Black Studies instructors, in this case students

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ernestine Lipscomb to The Administration, Department Heads, Faculty, and Students, 13 March 1968. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁶⁶ Memo to the Office of President, Jackson State College, 12 June 1970. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁶⁷ Memo to Assistant Dean of Instruction, Jackson State College, 5 June 1969. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

using the Institute's resources, with creative research and teaching methodologies. The standardization of teaching materials provided high school teachers with a general body of source material and critical questions that each of these teachers could use in their classrooms. Furthermore, Alexander's workshop embraced the concept of a "Black synthesis" that she raises in her essay, "Humanities with a Black Focus."¹⁶⁹ A "Black synthesis" is a student's ability to employ the tools of criticism to analyze and synthesize using a "Black paradigm."¹⁷⁰ Workshop participants were "graded" in the eighth week of the program based on their ability to "structure a working model that will facilitate the integration of Black Studies into the curricula."¹⁷¹ Particularly, in this teacher training program, Alexander assessed Black Studies educators' quality through their ability to create curriculum and lesson plans in their particular discipline. Teacher-participants had to develop bibliographies and displays showing their ability to use sources in Black Studies, and then, the teachers received feedback and a grade on their ability to do so successfully. Essentially, the workshop provided teachers with Black Studies materials, content, and questions that they had to synthesize into curriculum at in their schools and districts.

This particular model of teaching critical and creative thinking in order to produce a "Black synthesis" in order to address pressing concerns on the high school level came to outline the Institute's teaching methodology. Having the ability to research and assemble information from existing sources honored research traditions. However, Alexander also encouraged teachers to use their insight and rigorous teacher training competency to create new teaching practices and knowledge in their classrooms and not rely completely on previous teaching materials. In this

¹⁶⁹ Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, ed., "Humanities with a Black Focus," in *On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 99.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁷¹ Memo to Assistant Dean of Instruction, Jackson State College, 5 June 1969. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

way, Alexander promoted teacher ingenuity and dynamic classrooms that showed the expanding nature of Black Studies education.

This summer teacher training program was followed by the National Evaluative Conference in Black Studies in 1971. The National Evaluative Conference was designed to “assess the social significance and educational worth, and to evaluate the whole Program of Black Studies on College campus, Black and white.”¹⁷² The goal was to theorize, identify, and evaluate a “model program” in Black Studies. Alexander felt that Black Studies needed to evolve into a legitimate field with identifiable educational benefits. In order to assess this, she posed these general questions: “How are these programs being implemented? What permanent educational valued do they promise? In what way are they fully integrated into the general course of study? In what specific ways are they serving the community at large? How are they effecting social change in the college and the nation?”¹⁷³ That Alexander is posing these specific questions of Black Studies highlights her move away from contributionism. Instead, Alexander was searching for practical value of Black Studies education that embodied the principles of the Black nationalist movement. Jackson State College anticipated more than 750 delegates including political analyst and journalist, Chuck Stone; Vincent Harding, Director of the Institute for the Black World; sociologists C. Eric Lincoln and St. Clair Drake; historian John Henrik Clarke; writers Sarah Fabio, Alex Haley, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker. The National Evaluative Conference had numerous workshops for directors, historians, sociologist, literary scholars, artists, and theology and religion studies scholars. The conference was designed to strengthen teaching in each of these fields of Black Studies. As student journalist and associate

¹⁷² Memo to Office of Dean of Instruction, Jackson State College, 14 August 1970. Series I, Box 2, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

editor of *The Blue and White Flash*, Frank B. Melton wrote, “This will be the largest and most informative conference ever held on a Black campus and especially at Jackson State College. For all the lost and apathetic brothers and sisters living around on campus, dig some of these workshops and get your mind blown.”¹⁷⁴ For the disciplines of Black Studies, the conference, through self-reflection with top scholars and artists from around the country, aimed to redress the effectiveness of the program and honor its commitment to students and the community.

In 1973, JSC’s Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People put methodologically driven research pedagogies into practice. For its Summer Institute for Directed Research in Black Studies, it hosted a workshop for college teachers, librarians, and graduate students designed to teach methods of collecting data, preservation and archival methods, handling papers of noted scholars and artists, publishing scholarly research, papers, books, and journals, beginning collections on Black materials, and beginning museums.¹⁷⁵ They did this by collecting data through oral histories, using primary sources and secondary sources for literature and art, recording folk tales from the elderly, learning lamination and de-acidifying techniques, and attending lectures of professionals and librarians who regularly employ these methods. By 1977, the Institute cemented this pedagogical methodology throughout its conferences. Two conferences, the Conference on Africa and African Affairs and the Conference on the Plight of the Cities used rigorous research methodologies and workshop training in order to pragmatically transform society. The Conference on the Plight of the Cities utilized its educational resources to provide Black municipal leaders, like Charles Evers, Unita B. Wright, and Bennie Thompson, with an analysis of the problems and research oriented solutions in

¹⁷⁴ Frank B. Melton, *The Blue and White Flash*, “Check It Out,” February 1971.

¹⁷⁵ Summer Institute for Directed Research in Black Studies Program, 11 June 1973, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

dealing with the Black urban and rural problem.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the Africa and African Affairs conference sought to use teaching units and research in order to develop and deeper understanding of Pan-African issues and better resources to pursue societal transformation.

As previously mentioned, Black Studies at Jackson State also had Black feminist beginnings, particularly because of its desire to struggle for a woman-centered narrative in Africana scholarship. In 1973, Alexander brought the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival to Jackson State College in celebration of the bicentennial of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. As stated previously, Alexander invited women who were notorious Black women artists but also were progenitors in Black Studies. Some of these women, like Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, and Sarah Fabio, had previous relationships with the Institute. Two years earlier, they had all attended the National Evaluative Conference and were panelists during the African American Literature section of the conference. Scholars like Alice Walker were critical of the masculinist orientations of Black Studies, having taught courses and lectures on Black women's literature. Walker even critiqued Margaret Walker Alexander in her womanist treatise, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker writes,

"The first time I heard [Zora Neale Hurston's] name, I was auditing a Black literature class taught by the great poet Margaret Walker at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi. The reason this fact later slipped my mind was that Zora's name and accomplishments came and went so fast. The class was studying the usual "giants" of Black literature: Chestnutt, Toomer, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, with the hope of reaching LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] very soon. Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall (unequaled in intelligence, vision, craft by anyone of her generation, to put her contributions to our literature modestly), and Zora Neale Hurston were names appended, like verbal footnotes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Conference on the Plight of the Cities Program, 12 June 1977, Series I Box 5, Margaret Walker Alexander Personal Papers [AF012], Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson State University, P. O. Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108.

¹⁷⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 84.

To be clear, the 1973 poetry festival preceded Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's 1982 *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, the text that called for Black Women's Studies, by nine years.¹⁷⁸ Alexander's decision to invite Black women alone and center Black womanhood in the analysis and genealogy of Black artistry speaks to this desire to claim a space for Black female subjects. These Black women wanted to redress the historical characterization of this Phillis Wheatley. They saw her beyond an example of Black genius and the contributionist narrative. Particularly, Alice Walker sought to deal with the misconception of Wheatley as a racially compromised and indoctrinated. Phillis, Walker contends, has been held up to "ridicule for more than a century."¹⁷⁹ Walker writes, "We know now that you were not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly little Black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave, a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue."¹⁸⁰ Similarly, Alexander's poem "Ballad for Phillis Wheatley" provided a poetical acknowledgement of the travesty of Wheatley's capture, relocation, dislocation, dehumanization, and ultimately killed under the violence of slavery.¹⁸¹ When Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith wrote the introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave*, they identified four major tenants of the politics of Black Women's Studies. They include:

“(1) the general political situation of Afro-American women and the bearing this has had upon the implementation of Black Women's Studies; (2) the relationship of Black Women's Studies to Black feminist politics and the Black feminist movement; (3) the necessity for Black Women's Studies to be feminist, radical, and analytical; and (4) the need for teachers of Black Women's Studies to be aware of our problematic political

¹⁷⁸ Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. (The Feminist Press, 1982), xvii.

¹⁷⁹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 236.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 237.

¹⁸¹ Margaret Walker, "Ballad for Phillis Wheatley," in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 122-123.

positions in the academy and of the potentially antagonistic conditions under which we must work.”¹⁸²

While Alexander and the rest of these Black women scholars and artists did not articulate the mature Black feminist pedagogy above, they were beginning to analyze the political situation of Black women cultural producers, particularly this enslaved, labor-driven, sexually shamed Black woman. They were also critiquing the masculinist traditions of Black Studies and resisting how Black female subjects were being represented in scholarship, particularly in literary criticism. Alexander, in her own essay, “Black Women in Academia,” analyzed her Black female family member’s historic relationship to teaching, being underpaid, and exploited for their labor.¹⁸³ In her reflection of the festival, Alexander posed these particular questions: “How are we to assess the women who come after Wheatley? What is the relationship to the literary culture? In short, what are we to make of Phillis’s ‘relatives?’”¹⁸⁴ That Alexander used this concept of Black women as relatives illuminates Alexander’s understanding that Black women share a historical condition as Black women under a specifically racialized and gendered system. In this way, she was reflecting on a sort of Black feminist genealogy.

Alexander’s Black humanism was employed throughout the programming of the Institute. While it had a start in just trying to address issues of racial self-concept and alienation in society, it soon matured into a critically pedagogical tool that sought to empower its students with content knowledge, research methods, institution building, archival and preservation skills, and critical and creative thinking. These programs, the National Evaluative Conference, the Summer Institute for Directed Research, the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival, the Conference on

¹⁸² Hull, Scott, and Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave*, xvii.

¹⁸³ Alexander, “Black Women in Academia,” 26-32.

¹⁸⁴ Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, ed., “Phillis Wheatley and Black Women Writers, 1773-1972,” in *On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 38.

Africa and African Affairs, and the Conference on the Plight of the Cities all modeled rigorous, methodical research that standardized Black Studies methods and honored the tradition of scholar-activism that sought to transform society through the educational arena. In a very different way, Alexander, as a scholar-activist, used this Black Studies space as an ideological movement center to provide resources for scholars to engage in social and political transformation.

6 WRITING THE SOCIAL WORLD: ALEXANDER'S EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM FOR CHANGE

This thesis project has undergone several revisions, editorially and ideologically. In the beginning, I was searching for a Black Studies history at Jackson State. As an undergraduate, then an alumnus, I was sorely concerned and disappointed that Jackson State did not offer a major or minor in Black Studies, and I had set out on the ambitious journey of engaging in scholarly work that would result in the immersion of a certificate, minor, or major. To my surprise, I learned that Jackson State had already been rooted in a tradition of Black Studies through the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. In the summer of 2013, I was recruited by Dr. Rico Chapman through the Center for Undergraduate Research to engage in primary source research on Margaret Walker Alexander and her role in bringing Black Studies to Jackson State College. Dr. Chapman, four other undergraduates, and I began our quest to conduct and prepare original research by exploring the archives at the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center. During this time, I was simply amazed that a Black woman intellectual had this much fortitude and administrative acumen to facilitate an interdisciplinary program at Jackson State. I was also equally disappointed that this was a sort of hidden history absent from the historic civil rights tours and campus tours that student

organizations give during recruitment days. My first goal, after merely writing historical surveys of its existence on campus and participating in panel discussions with my undergraduate research team at conferences where audience members often questioned the legitimacy and usefulness of Black Studies, then or now, was to explore Black Studies at Jackson State as resource to the community.

My first solo research project was undertaken as a part of one of my history courses at Jackson State. I had saw that Margaret Walker Alexander's successor, Alferdteen Harrison, had a background in public history and used her skills in preservation in order to serve the historically Black Farish Street District. With little historical imagination, I began exploring the oral history archives that the Institute had undertaken. My senior thesis, which really did not have an awesome argument, explored the local people of Farish Street as represented in the oral histories recorded by the Institute. The Institute had recorded just over seventy interviews with themes around civil rights, business, and entertainment. I was interested in understanding the paradox of Farish Street as a booming Black business district, a source of racial pride during the Jim Crow era, and the awkwardness of Black middle class flight which ultimately drained the district of its once burning fire. Why exactly was Farish Street in need of a revitalization project in the first place? Why did Black middle class residents of Farish Street abandon the district as soon as they had the opportunity? It was never a historical a phenomenon that I fully understood. Honestly, maybe I was asking the wrong questions.

Instead of trying to use historical research to trying to answer sweeping inquires, I instead turned to explore the historical sources at play. When I entered Georgia State University's graduate program in African American Studies, I had been refining and revisiting this historical project, reflecting on my historical and methodological blind spots. I had been pushed by one of

my history professors at Jackson State to go deeper, be more analytical, think more in terms of movement and conflict between local actors. I decided I needed to delve deeper into the social forces that informed Farish Street, therefore, Jackson, therefore, Mississippi. Then I asked why the Institute decided to take on this project? What about its mission inspired it to attempt to save Farish Street and protect it as a self-determined, autonomous Black cultural artifact? I realized that in order to answer this question, I needed to first understand the social and ideological forces that created the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. I also understood that I needed to understand the woman who founded it and how she imagined its scholarly and artistic output, its potential, and its duty to the campus and surrounding communities. This is how this project came to be, and ultimately, these are the pressing concerns of this work.

I will discuss the research design and methodology, the theoretical frameworks that inform this historical study, and the literature review. I will also discuss my findings. I surmise that the research revealed that Alexander designed an Institute that was deeply committed to the liberation of Black people in America, specifically, and Africans in the diaspora, generally.

As stated in the introduction, the scholarly aim of this research project was to expand the dimensions of Ibram Kendi's Black Campus Movement beyond a student-centered narrative of activism by conducting a social movement, institutional and intellectual history of Jackson, the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People, and Margaret Walker Alexander. At times, the study seems like more of one and less of the other, particularly more social movement history than an institutional history or more of an intellectual history than a social movement history. Also, at times, it seems like a history of Black higher education, as it should. While it is stated explicitly that this is a social movement, institutional, and intellectual

history, it is discursive and flexible in its use of methodologies. In many ways, this study embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Black Studies that Alexander imagined.

Kendi's Black Campus Movement proved to be the most effective paradigm to place the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. Kendi's goal was to center the campus experience, particularly how subjects in these educational projects navigated and challenged the philosophies and practices of these higher education institutions. Asking the questions of what, who, where, when, and how of a specific educational institution within the frame of the Black freedom struggle elevated the Institute as a resistance project, as a form of cultural creation designed to address the hegemonic social, political, and educational practices on campus and in the community. In addition, Alexander was able to move beyond being a bystander in this political struggle and became understood as a collaborator in Black liberation politics with her own motivations, creations, and victories. This only became successful by moving beyond the archives. I had to reimagine what a primary source was. I had to question why, in the historical process, administrative files and institutional records are rationed as the superior documents for historical study. It is this idea of the archives, however they are contained and maintained, that renders all others invisible. Instead, I needed to see Alexander's creative works and essays as valuable primary source material. Committing a literary analysis was useful. It provided more girth to understanding Alexander's ideological motivations. As an anti-lynching poem, she joins a long line of Black women who organized anti-lynching campaigns throughout the South. It also causes one to rethink President Reddix. He recruited a Black woman who had produced scholarship that advocated for revolt, critiqued lynching, and critiqued the racial and class order. Black Mississippians were murdered and fired for less.

Alexander should be remembered not only as a skilled poet and novelist, but as a radical educational philosopher, practitioner, and innovator. While urban communities around the nation were seeing Black rebellion, Alexander was publishing poetry honoring Black insurrection and civil disobedience. She was writing about revolution in the academy when students in Jackson were rebelling against the police state. She was engaging in an educational project to claim and train the minds of the Black community to have the critical and creative skills to accomplish liberation. She advocated for a facts driven research methodology, one rooted in the student's social experiences. And she does all of this as a collaborator, not alone or in isolation. Alexander was surely a "Great Woman" but not in the sense of shifting the "Great Man" centered narrative to a single woman. Future scholarship should better amplify the relationship between Black Studies at Jackson State and administrators, staff, students, the community and national scholars and artists. It is clear that Alexander collaborated with President Peoples, the Black Studies Committee, the Institute's staff, students, librarians, philanthropic entities, and visiting scholars and artists. However, this should not downplay the role that she played as director of the Institute. Her skills, relationships, and insights were valuable assets in the program's development, in the securing of grants, and recruitment. Her Black humanist philosophy of social change underwrote the Institute's mission and provided a pathway and rationale for each of the conferences and courses that the institute offered.

Looking at the development of Black Studies over the last half a century, particularly the social and historical forces that inform the university, one can marvel at the institutionalization of multiple disciplinary traditions of Black Studies. Having the ability to look back at Jackson State College's Black Studies program under Margaret Walker's tenure illuminates that scholar-activist tradition intimately embedded at the root of Black Studies. It embodies Alexander's idea

of moving theory into practice. It seeks transformation and liberation for Black peoples at the intersections of their oppressions.

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