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IMPOSSIBLE ALLIES:
SNCC, BLACK FREEDOM, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS LIBERAL ALLIANCE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of Black Power and amidst a resurgence of national interest in African American grassroots political mobilizations under the Black Lives Matter umbrella, this dissertation argues for a reformulation of how we understand the history of the civil rights movement, Black Power, and their respective, though interrelated, relationships to Black-defined liberation, mainstream liberalism, and radical politics. By analyzing and reframing familiar debates this project pursues a more usable history for ongoing liberation struggles. It first argues that though it was politically valuable to the civil rights establishment to align itself with mainstream white liberals in the national politics, in media, and in the public sphere, this civil rights liberal alliance ultimately de-centered Black-defined interests, visions, and goals from the Black freedom struggle. While grassroots, Black-centered direct action was a key part of the civil rights liberal framework, maintaining strategic alliance with white liberals in positions of power continued to be a movement priority.

From this basis this dissertation re-interprets the liberal framework of the mainstream civil rights movement by examining the uneasy relationship between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the civil rights liberal alliance. SNCC's political trajectory illustrates these tensions well. They were an organization of young people who were both independent from but highly influenced by existing civil rights organizations. Yet, over the course of SNCC's organizational life, they eventually eschewed the liberal framework out of which they came. This project examines this trajectory, highlighting their call for Black Power in 1966 to demonstrate the ways in which Black Power represented a reassertion of Black-centered struggle and simultaneously, how that re-assertion was unacceptable within the framework of the civil rights liberal alliance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For my Mother

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INTRODUCTION

In spite of compounding evidence to the contrary, most popular historical narratives (liberal and conservative) continue to celebrate the classical civil rights movement period (1954-1965) as a hallmark of American progress. In these narratives, the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act on the heels of the 1964 Civil Rights Act ensured that African Americans were no longer second-class citizens in the United States. Though racist white outliers still existed in backwards and parochial pockets, particularly in the South, the predominant narrative tells us that the lion's share of what was needed to overcome racial inequality in the United States had been accomplished. Such celebrations ignore the advances in systemic white supremacy and anti-Blackness that have developed in the last half-century, in the wake of, and often in direct response to, the gains of the civil rights movement. The rise of mass incarceration and mass criminalization, for example, which continue to disproportionately impact people of color and Black communities in particular, emerged *after* the supposed achievement of a post-civil rights racial equality.

Mainstream explanations of these trends have relied on narratives of Black pathology, immorality, and individual responsibility. In fact, the legal achievements of the civil rights movement have been mobilized as justification for these narratives: African Americans caught up in the system had no one to blame but themselves. While pathologizing narratives and dehumanizing characterizations of Black people have had a continual presence in American history, they took new form in the post-civil rights era. The angry Black criminal and the undeserving welfare queen shared an inappropriate sense of entitlement and ungratefulness.[1]

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[1] For more on framing entitlement see: Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, "'The Crime of Survival': Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original 'Welfare Queen'," *Journal of*

These tropes arose in juxtaposition to the image of Black humility, morality, and respectability embodied by the mythic civil rights movement figure. It is not circumstantial that the heroic civil rights leaders we often memorialize were, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., educated men, from middle class professional backgrounds, with claims to Christian morality and a steadfast dedication to nonviolence. This mold was strategic and effective. It helped to define the strict bounds of civil rights legitimacy that facilitated the civil rights movement.

This dissertation re-examines the traditional civil rights movement period and explores the bounds of civil rights legitimacy in order to reframe how we think of the civil rights movement in the ongoing Black freedom struggle. It is no longer sufficient for our everyday histories to view the civil rights movement so simply, as a celebratory marker of success for Black freedom. Instead, I contend that the most useful way to understand the civil rights movement is as a limited alliance between mainstream civil rights leaders and organizations, on the one hand, and white liberals on the other. While this formulation is less dramatic, I believe it is both more accurate and also more effective at making sense of what has happened in the ongoing Black freedom struggle over the past half century. This civil rights liberal alliance helped to facilitate a great expansion of liberal power in the postwar period in the United States. Yet how this alliance developed and functioned significantly circumscribed the Black freedom struggle by carving out a narrow band of legitimacy in terms of movement goals, strategies, tactics, participants, leaders, practices, and values. As a result, the Black freedom struggle had unprecedented mainstream visibility and support during the era of the civil rights movement.

Social History (Winter 2007): 329-354; Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, "Guns and Butter: The Welfare State, the Carceral State, and the Politics of Exclusion in the Postwar United States," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (2015): 87-99; Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

However, the implicit rules of the civil rights liberal alliance prioritized the interests of movement allies over the self-defined interests and concerns of Black people. In this way, while grassroots direct action mobilizations and on-the-ground organizing efforts led by African Americans made the civil rights movement possible, the civil rights liberal alliance established a context in which Black humanity and Black lives could still be easily de-centered. For scholars and activists interested in ongoing liberation struggles, this is the story of the civil rights movement that needs to be emphasized.

Terminology: Black Humanity, Liberalism, and the Civil Rights Liberal Alliance

Starting from the assumption that liberation is inextricable from a conscious sense of one's own personal power and human agency, this project uses the term "Black humanity" in the context of the Black freedom struggle to refer to the configurations of internal liberation, including themes of consciousness, agency, pride, and self-determination at the level of the individual as well as the community.

The merger of interests between leaders of mainstream civil rights organizations, white liberal politicians, mainstream liberal power holders in media, industry, and U.S. institutions outside of politics, including labor, and mainstream liberal popular sentiment, has been called various things: liberal civil rights alliance, liberal civil rights coalition, labor-liberal-civil rights coalition, etc. In this dissertation I primarily use the term "civil rights liberal alliance" to refer to this set of merged interests, though the others work, and do emerge occasionally in this writing as well.

Among the most challenging terms to grapple with in this project are "liberal" and "liberalism." Those who self-identified as liberals in mainstream politics, media, and mass

culture and claimed allegiance to a liberal ideology are certainly included. But my use of "liberal" in this project is also as a descriptor for a variety of behaviors, assumptions, and goals among mainstream figures and everyday people who, though they may come from a variety of political affiliations, functioned as liberals in relation to the Black freedom struggle.

A critique of liberalism is a central part of this project and yet the definition of liberalism that it uses is admittedly fluid. Though I am sympathetic to critiques that in this formulation "liberalism" and "liberal" can become catchall terms, I also believe that it is a necessary fluidity to attend to the mutability and multifaceted nature of how liberalism has functioned in its interactions with the Black freedom struggle during and since the civil rights movement.

Common definitions of classical liberalism have included a commitment to themes like individual freedom, natural rights, and constitutional government. However, this formulation offers very little to distinguish between liberal and conservative politics in recent U.S. history, for example, as both derive from what we call classical or constitutional liberalism. Instead, this dissertation is concerned with the particular manifestation of liberalism that emerged in the United States after World War II and solidified against the backdrop of the cold war. According to historian Doug Rossinow, while many of the liberals of the 1930s had joined with those to their left in Popular Front politics, postwar liberalism embraced a new uncritical commitment to capitalism, an explicit rejection of left allies, and a seemingly deep aversion to anything resembling revolutionary or radical alternatives. "The memory of liberalism's anti-capitalist heritage," he explains, "of the fierce critique of American capitalism that long had animated one large wing of American liberalism, quickly faded, a memory that liberals had reason to wish gone during the era of McCarthyism. The earlier compatibility of liberalism with a supportive

view of social transformation was erased from the nation's political rule book."[2] As Rossinow suggests, postwar liberals became increasingly invested in celebrating, rather than challenging, the "progress" of postwar American politics and global capitalism. According to Sociologist Paul Starr, "…in the years after World War II many historians and social scientists regarded the liberal project and American civic creed as more or less identical."[3]

In this sense, postwar liberals became the primary defenders of the status quo. Yet, simultaneously, and most significantly for this project, they were also committed to expanding civil rights and liberties to those who had been excluded in the past, particularly African Americans. This combination manifested in a very particular set of interests, particularly among white liberals in the postwar United States. "Liberals gradually embraced the cause of civil rights and racial inclusion," Rossinow explains, "but they did not welcome insurgencies against the American social and political system, either domestically or internationally, as cold war radicals did—and as some earlier liberals had."[4] Thus, while the postwar liberal was committed to racial equality, she was even more committed to the prevailing economic, social, and political systems of the United States.

Situating postwar liberals in a particular historical context provides a partial explanation for the way that "liberal" and "liberalism" appear in this text. However, as historian Matthew Countryman explains, postwar liberalism was still a "slippery ideological phenomenon" and liberals had an "ideological fluidity." Part of this fluidity was due to the way that liberalism functioned. Liberal "political commitments," Countryman suggests, "…were tied more to

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[2] Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 8.

[3] Paul Starr, *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 1.

[4] Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress*, 9.

process than they were to ideology." Rather than "a coherent and consistent political ideology" liberalism could be "a marker of a particular social and class location."[5] According to journalist Edmund Fawcett, liberalism was as much a practice as it was an ideology.[6] In the context of the postwar Black freedom struggle, liberals engaged in a variety of practices and processes from a variety of societal roles and locations.

Indeed, scholars who have studied the history and political philosophy of liberalism are often most closely agreed on one thing: it is difficult to define. As political theorist Michael Freeden explains, "There is no single, unambiguous thing called liberalism…. It may therefore be more accurate to talk about *liberalisms* in the plural, all part of a broad family exhibiting both similarities and differences."[7] Though Freeden is referring to various manifestations of liberalism that have existed across the globe over the past few centuries, his proposal of multiple liberalisms is also meaningful in the particular context of postwar liberalism in the United States.

Admittedly, this dissertation is critical of liberalism in all of its forms in the postwar context for the ways in which it de-centered Black humanity from the Black freedom struggle. However, at least one way in which the concept of multiple liberalisms is useful here is for distinguishing between the roles, practices, and values of white liberals and those of African American liberals. Though all liberals generally shared a commitment to American values, and a belief in the gradual process of reform as the most desirable means of achieving racial equality and societal change more broadly, African American liberals had a relationship to the Black

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[5] Matthew Countryman, "Questions of Gender, Class, and Politics in Philadelphia's Black Power Movement," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 130, No. 4 (Oct 2006), 409, 410.

[6] Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of An Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), *xviii, xxi*.

[7] Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1, 3.

freedom struggle that was necessarily distinct from that of whites. Most obviously, white liberals were allies while Black liberals were not: the struggle was theirs. The primary critique of liberalism in this project is a critique of white liberalism, and, in particular, the ways that white liberals wielded power toward their own ends through their alliance with the Black freedom struggle.

Countryman's discussion of how liberalism functioned in postwar Philadelphia is useful for articulating this interpretation. According to Countryman, Philadelphia liberals often "convey[ed] the belief that they and only they possessed the necessary combination of technical know-how and moral clarity to govern the city well." This sense of paternalism was a common theme among white liberals who interacted with the Black freedom struggle. He continues:

> Philadelphia liberals valorized public service over the pursuit of private interests and shared an instinct for a particular mix of technocratic government, gradual top-down reform, and managed negotiation of competing interests within the city. Thus, Philadelphia's liberals—white liberals, in particular—could and did see themselves as simultaneously allied with, but never fully of, the city's Democratic machine, local labor leaders, and the black freedom movement.[8]

As Countryman suggests, liberalism is often most easily recognized in practices and approaches, in particular those that were invested in top-down solutions to racial inequality, putting decision-making in the hands of "experts", and an overarching commitment to the existing social, cultural, and political structures of the United States, opting for versions of reform and incremental adjustment to expand the rights and liberties of more people, rather than working towards radical or revolutionary change. In addition, liberalism often reflected an inattentiveness to the invisible privileges and hierarchies of white supremacy that existed in mainstream discourse, national politics, as well as more immediate, localized, and interpersonal interactions.

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[8] Countryman, "Questions of Gender, Class, and Politics in Philadelphia's Black Power Movement," 410.

The term "liberal civil rights framework" describes the set of values, assumptions, and agreements that undergirded the civil rights liberal alliance. Because part of the power of the liberal civil rights framework is its mutability, this dissertation tries to define the framework in rather broad terms. Specifically, it starts from the assumption that the civil rights movement operated within a liberal civil rights framework, which meant that the vision of Black freedom within the civil rights movement put primacy on Black alliance with external power holders, particularly in the federal government and among other white liberal political and financial allies.

A distinguishing characteristic of the civil rights movement and its larger liberal civil rights frame was the confluence of nonviolent direct action and reliance on liberal allies. This created a framework where nonviolent direct action became directed towards eliciting sympathetic and moral support from power holders as a primary strategy of liberation. The civil rights liberal alliance created the specific and necessary conditions for this strategy. It depended equally on nonviolent direct action and white liberal allied support. Furthermore, it created the conditions for an essential politics of respectability within the movement. In this way, the liberal civil rights framework defined the bounds of legitimate Black protest and Black freedom. They were circumscribed by claims to morality, mainstream visibility, strategic commitment to nonviolence, and (like in all alliances) approaches and actions that did not threaten the power of their white liberal allies.

Like other scholars who have critiqued aspects of the civil rights movement, my intent is not to diminish the accomplishments, courage, or strength of the Black struggles that fall within the liberal civil rights framework as I have proposed it. It is rather to recognize the limits engendered in the civil rights liberal alliance. Though efforts to assert Black humanity at the center of struggle were circumscribed by the interests of liberal allies during the civil rights

movement, Black freedom activists never stopped asserting themselves and their visions of freedom. Through their labor and passion, the liberation struggle continues.

SNCC and the Civil Rights Liberal Alliance

This dissertation examines the emergence of the civil rights liberal alliance and looks at examples from the political trajectory of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to illustrate the ways in which Black humanity became de-centered in the civil rights movement. The political trajectory of SNCC illustrates the tensions between Black humanity and the civil rights liberal alliance well. Formed in April 1960 out of a wave of student sit-ins that spread across the South over the course of just a few months, SNCC quickly became the student wing of the civil rights movement. Unlike other mainstream civil rights organizations, SNCC was formed already deep within the framework of the civil rights liberal alliance. They were an organization of young people who were both independent from but highly influenced by existing civil rights organizations. Over the course of SNCC's organizational life, SNCC eventually eschewed the liberal framework out of which they came. In public discourse, SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in June 1966 became the flashpoint for this shift. The liberal reaction was titanic, with serious implications for the civil rights liberal alliance and for SNCC.

However, unlike liberal declension narratives of the civil rights movement and SNCC, this story is not about SNCC's demise in the face of impatience, disillusionment, and burgeoning radicalism (or even in the face of liberal foot-dragging, internalized white racism, and liberal political opportunism). Nor is this a project that seeks to romanticize Black Power as an unrealized path toward liberation. Instead, this dissertation examines the contours of the civil

rights liberal alliance, the struggle between human and liberal interests through the framework of nonviolence, the function of liberalism within SNCC, and the public spectacle around SNCC that emerged in 1966. I do this in the service of a single primary assertion: that liberalism is incompatible with liberation.

Three interrelated arguments run throughout this dissertation to undergird this assertion. First, as I have prefaced here, I argue that we should think of the civil rights liberal alliance as a central defining factor of the civil rights movement and, more controversially, that this alliance did not advance but in fact limited the pursuit of Black freedom. Second, I posit that this line of analysis allows us to see SNCC's embrace of Black Power in 1966 not as an expression of radicalism but instead as an attempt to re-insert Black humanity at the center of struggle. Finally, I consider the ways in which the predominance of the civil rights liberal alliance has impacted historical work on the civil rights movement. I argue that the limiting effect of this civil rights liberal framework has been perpetuated in our historical analysis of grassroots organizing in the Black freedom struggle. Our histories often celebrate local, grassroots organizing but fail to critically engage it. As a result, Black freedom movement scholarship from a variety of political perspectives fails to create robust usable histories for continued liberation struggles.

The first two chapters of this project explore the origins of the civil rights liberal alliance and liberal civil rights framework. Chapter one rehearses historical arguments about the civil rights movement to frame the emergence of the civil rights liberal alliance. In chapter two I examine the origins of nonviolence as it functioned within the civil rights movement, arguing that the particular interpretation of Gandhian nonviolence from Christian pacifists in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) had a direct impact on the strategic framework of nonviolent direct action in the civil rights movement. This

framework of nonviolence became essential to the civil rights liberal alliance because it contained within it a primarily external orientation, often emphasizing how nonviolent direct action would impact potential allies over how it would affect the participants themselves. This chapter argues that the strategic framework of nonviolence fueled the emerging civil rights liberal alliance.

The remaining chapters examine the role of civil rights liberalism in the political development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In these chapters I argue that the trajectory of SNCC's changing and tenuous relationship to the civil rights liberal alliance provide a strong example for how postwar liberalism not only severely circumscribed the Black freedom struggle but in fact forestalled the possibility of Black-centered visions of freedom within the civil rights liberal alliance. Chapter three turns attention to SNCC, examining the ways in which SNCC functioned in tension with the liberal civil rights framework in their on-the-ground organizing efforts after 1961. I challenge historical declension narratives that have claimed that SNCC declined in national prominence when they began to retreat from their organizing tradition and initial values after 1964. Instead, I demonstrate that elements of SNCC's organizational decline were already in process in the midst of what scholars have framed as SNCC's pre-1964 "golden era" of community organizing. I argue that the roots of SNCC's organizational decline are more accurately connected to the "internalized liberalism" that functioned within the organization from its beginnings. Chapter four turns to the moment of rupture in dominant narratives of SNCC: Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" during a speech in Greenwood, Mississippi during the "March Against Fear" in June 1966. Examining the context of the "March Against Fear" and the liberal response to Black Power, this chapter makes two arguments. First, that the March itself represented an expression of Black Power: a Black-

led, Black-defined, and Black-centered organizing campaign. Second, I argue that mainstream responses to the March and the "Black Power" slogan were less about what the march and the phrase actually meant and more about what they represented: SNCC's emerging disinterest in the civil rights liberal alliance. The final chapter examines the historical narratives about SNCC and Black Power that began to develop in mainstream media and public discourse during 1966 and 1967, and ultimately took root in the historiography of SNCC, Black Power, and the civil rights movement over the past few decades. This chapter suggests that more robust engagement with categories like liberalism and radicalism, as well as analyses of on-the-ground grassroots organizing, are needed to combat historiographical trends that have perpetuated rather than challenged the predominance of the civil rights liberal alliance in our histories. This chapter contends that longstanding trends in the scholarship have perpetuated historical narratives that detract from building usable histories in the ongoing Black freedom struggle.

Periodizing the Civil Rights Movement

In the past few decades, scholars of the Black freedom struggle have re-examined and challenged many of the prevailing assumptions about the civil rights movement, Black Power, and the legacy of African American activism in the twentieth century. This has involved not only revisiting movement content (e.g. goals, strategies, tactics, ideologies, leaders, participants, and associations), but it has also included attempts to rework the naming and periodization of the dominant waves of Black political activity, particularly in the post-World War II period. Chief among these trends in the scholarship is the now prominent framework of a "long" civil rights movement. Long movement proponents question the "classical" timeline of the postwar Black freedom struggle, where the era of "Civil Rights" was the decade between 1954 and 1965, and

advent of "Black Power" from 1966 to 1975. Instead, they extend the timeline in both directions, back to the 1930s and 1940s and forward into the 1980s and after.[9]

Proponents of this periodization have contributed to Black freedom struggle scholarship in a variety of ways. They encourage us to recognize that historical periodization does not produce clean chronological or ideological distinctions. Further, they retrieve less visible iterations and configurations of Black activism and seek to recognize the diversity and complexity of recent and ongoing mobilizations. Indeed, the strongest contribution from long movement thesis proponents has been made by those who insist on expanding our conceptions of leadership and movement power so that we recognize the necessary contributions of a diversity of actors, including Black women and members of poor and working class communities. These scholars suggest that the traditional periodization of the movement necessarily privileges the work and interests of certain relatively elite leaders: ministers, formal educators, and other middle-class professional men. In this regard, locating power in the hands of many and

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[9] For an original articulation of the long movement thesis see: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91:4 (March 2005), 1233-63. See also: Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds. *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis, "Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals," *History Compass* 4 (2006): 348-367; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: 2008).

recognizing that it has been yielded in a variety of more and less visible ways is deeply important

work for our historical narratives.[10]

But is loosening the periodization of the twentieth-century Black freedom struggle

necessary to expand our understanding of Black agency and transformative power? Is the only

value of the traditional periodization of the civil rights movement the way it privileged certain

voices and experiences? If we do let go of the traditional periodization, will our historical

narratives no longer make meaningful distinctions between the civil rights movement and the era

of Black Power? This project begins by thinking about these questions of power, agency, and

periodization. It revisits our historical narratives in order to ask a relatively simple question:

what do we lose by loosening the "classical" historical periodization of the civil rights

movement?

While a number of scholars have challenged the "long movement" thesis, they have not

always considered this question directly. Historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries, for example, argues

against the long movement thesis in two ways. First, he suggests that the call for a "long" civil

rights movement limits our understanding of Black activism by making it solely about the pursuit

of civil rights and ignoring the diversity of goals and interests that have made up the Black

freedom movement.[11] This critique is important, thought it brings Jeffries to a second, shakier

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[10] See for example: Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[11] It should be noted that other scholars have made similar gestures. Peniel Joseph, for example, has argued for Black Power, rather than civil rights, as the all-encompassing Black freedom struggle framework. See: Peniel Joseph, "Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement," *Black Scholar* 31 (Fall-Winter 2001): 3-19; *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006);*Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2010).

conclusion: the main problem with the long civil rights movement is that it is not long enough. Instead, Jeffries posits that we should view the entire post-emancipation period as an encompassing struggle for what he calls "freedom rights": "the assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom." Though his concept of freedom rights is a valuable contribution to our lexicon for the complex and varied goals within the Black freedom struggle, Jeffries extends, rather than resolves, a key limit of the "long movement" thesis. As historians Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang have noted, such sweeping periodizations flatten historical specificity and ignore important themes of both continuity and change that are essential characteristics of the Black freedom struggle.[12]

Cha-Jua and Lang's critique points to a key limit of the long movement thesis. Though its proponents have argued that abandoning traditional periodization makes a diversity of political actors, strategies, and approaches more visible, the smoothed-over effect of the long civil rights movement narrative actually reduces our ability to recognize difference. The specificity of historical context gets erased. In this sense, long movement proponents undermine their own pursuit of diversifying our understanding of Black freedom struggles. Allowing the long civil rights movement to envelop the variety of ways that African Americans respond to and engage the circumstances that impact their lives reduces their meaning, significance, and value in the ongoing freedom struggle. As Cha-Jua and Lang explain, "if 'everything is everything,' and the social landscape of oppression and resistance is undifferentiated, historians oriented toward

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[12] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009)*,* 257-58 n15; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92:2 (Spring 2007), 265-288. See also: Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, "Introduction," in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds. *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: "Another Side of the Story* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

movement politics inadvertently absolve themselves of the necessity of critically assessing the unique political, social, and ideological climate of their own time, and the limits and possibilities it poses."[13]

In the same vein, when scholars seek to uncover histories of resistance but erase the specificity of the historical context, they risk invisibilizing key distinctions in form. Critique, acts of individual resistance, and mass social movements are not the same thing just as rebellion is different from reform, and both are distinct from revolution.[14] Further, erasing specificity also invisibilizes the structures and systems of oppression that are at work in a particular context. This is the primary concern of this project. When we collapse the periodization of the civil rights movement and Black Power as suggested by proponents of the long movement thesis and others, we lose a key mechanism of accountability. For these reasons, this dissertation re-asserts the significance of the traditional periodization of the civil rights movement.

To be clear, upholding this classical periodization is not to resurrect the traditionally elite, male-centered, and nationally legible biases in movement scholarship of the past. Nor is it to claim the superiority of the leaders, struggles, values and goals that its traditional narratives uphold. Apt critiques of their limits abound and have effectively demonstrated their silences on local struggles in and outside the South; in urban areas; and led by rank-and-file activists, including women, working class and poor people, who had varied goals and employed a variety of strategies and tactics, all of which can and did exist outside of the traditional civil rights movement framework. Rather, because of these critiques it is valuable to maintain a traditional periodization. Instead of uncritically celebrating the heroic civil rights movement, a primary

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[13] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 284.

[14] See: Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006,* 3rd ed., (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).

reason to acknowledge the specificity and particularity of the traditional civil rights movement period is in order to recognize its limits. This dissertation is about those limits. This emphasis is in pursuit of accountability.

The Civil Rights Liberal Alliance

The civil rights movement was historically distinct because it represented the convergence of two phenomena: the emergence of sustained, grassroots nonviolent direct action protest by African Americans and an unprecedented interest in Black civil and political rights among outside elites, most notably among white liberals. Though Black freedom-oriented protest mobilizations and the use of direct action have been present throughout U.S. history, the specific postwar frame of nonviolent, mass direct action used in the pursuit of African American civil rights had not. This particular framework emerged in relation, not opposition, to an expansion of mainstream legibility and visibility for the pursuit of African American freedom. This convergence with mainstream legibility helps to explain the predominance of nationally prominent, typically male, church-based, and middle class leadership that has been privileged in traditional civil rights movement narratives.

The strategic framework of the civil rights movement depended on the peculiar confluence of Black protest activity *and* mainstream American legitimacy. Cha-Jua and Lang have described this uneasy combination as a "counterhegemonic patriotism," that "celebrat[es] American values, while simultaneously struggling to transform them."[15] As I develop in chapter one, the counter hegemonic patriotism of Black activists in the civil rights movement developed in relation to the postwar rise of white liberal interest in African American civil rights and

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[15] Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 280.

political activity. The relationship between Black civil rights activists and white liberal allies created the postwar civil rights liberal alliance. Their shared commitment to American values and narratives of respectability was part of what made this alliance work, at least for a time. In this formulation, the traditionally recognized civil rights movement is inextricable from the broader framework of this alliance. Because of this, this dissertation contends that we need to maintain a traditional periodization of the civil rights movement in order to see its embeddedness in the broader framework of the civil rights liberal alliance.

This project zeroes in on the limiting effect of the civil rights liberal alliance and attempts to recast our historical understanding of the civil rights movement as the civil rights liberal alliance. This dissertation maintains that in spite of the efforts and achievements associated with the civil rights movement, the emergence of the civil rights liberal alliance actually limited, rather than expanded, the postwar movement for Black freedom. In this way, the strength of the civil rights movement was also its weakness: unprecedented mainstream legibility required a particular framing of leaders, participants, goals, strategies, tactics, and values that appealed to mainstream allies. The civil rights liberal alliance gained unprecedented mainstream interest by putting the interests and concerns of outside elites at the center of struggle. Yet if we believe that self-determined agency is a necessary component of liberation, then the centering of outside interests in the civil rights liberal alliance stood in the way of achieving liberation.

Pointing out the limits of liberalism in relation to the Black freedom struggle is nothing new. Black movement scholars from a variety of political perspectives have demonstrated the frustrating, challenging, and derailing influence that liberal allies had on the movement. Conversely, mainstream narratives of twentieth century U.S. history have often used the civil rights movement/Black power in order to expose the limits of liberalism since the 1960s. This

has not only been true in conservative impulses to use its association with Black power as way to discredit liberalism, but in fact, the same narratives have been used by liberals to lick wounds from the post-civil rights, rise of the Right, neoconservative, silent majority era, in order to explain the phenomenon they see as the failure of liberalism. In both purposes they share a similar logic: liberals gave Black activists too much room, ushering in their own demise.[16]

In this way, this dissertation is a project of shading in and reframing familiar narratives in order to show how the limits of liberalism are not a matter of being "too liberal": letting Black radicals derail the otherwise good progress of the nation. But the limits are also not just a matter of pace, gradualism, or reform (as if they had only moved faster or more effectively things could have been different). Instead, this project seeks to underscore the fundamental incompatibility between liberalism and liberation. Recognizing this incompatibility is crucial for building meaningful liberation struggles in the future.

Cold War Liberalism and Black Freedom

Scholars on the Left have launched similar critiques of civil rights liberalism from a variety of positions, including Black Nationalist, radical, feminist, and Marxist perspectives.[17] Indeed, Marxist critiques of civil rights liberalism often buttress the long movement thesis. Long movement proponents have located the origins of the long civil rights movement with the 1930s Left. They are certainly correct that the Black Left played an important role in the twentieth

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[16] For examples see: Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: 1984); Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

[17] There is arguably similar critique among scholars and conservatives on the far right as well, who at least in part blame civil rights liberalism for the problems they see in postwar America, though their concern is likely less focused on the direct impact of civil rights liberalism on Black lives and the pursuit of Black freedom.

century Black freedom struggle. However, the prominent role of the Black Left during the 1930s and 1940s offers more compelling evidence for why the classical civil rights movement period was unique: a defining factor of the traditional civil rights movement period was the unprecedented silence of the Left in mainstream Black political activity.

Many scholars on the Left have recognized that in the cold war context, the Black freedom struggle lost some of its most important leaders and organizers to anticommunist red baiting, political persecution, and organizational purges within Black, labor, and other political organizations. Because of this, within the construction of the civil rights liberal alliance, the left was conspicuously absent. In the social and political culture of cold war anticommunism after World War II, "red scare" politics had effectively ejected the left from any hope of continued participation in such an alliance. The costs of limiting the left were much greater than any benefits the cold war context offered to the Black freedom struggle by exposing the hypocrisy of U.S. racism to the world and encouraging mainstream efforts to redeem itself.[18] The human and organizational costs of U.S. anticommunism and "red baiting" on Black activists and organizations with ties or perceived ties to the left were dire. Whatever opportunities the cold war context provided for the Black freedom struggle in the United States were in direct relationship to the severe limits with which the postwar civil rights liberal alliance circumscribed the Black freedom struggle.

The explicit emphasis on morality, respectability, and patriotism that defined the politics of the civil rights mainstream during the civil rights movement (which I expand in the first chapter) was an outgrowth of this cold war dynamic. Historians Clarence Lang and Robbie Lieberman have argued:

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[18] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*; Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*; Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare.*

> [T]he Cold War and the accompanying Red Scare caused a rupture that profoundly affected the shape of the struggle that is popularly known as the civil rights movement. It was precisely the broader notion of black freedom—a global struggle for human rights encompassing anticolonialism and economic justice—that had to be downplayed in order to achieve 'civil rights.' More specifically, leftist individuals, organizations, and analyses had to be stifled."[19]

Drawing on this argument, this dissertation examines other ways that broader visions of Black freedom became stifled within the civil rights movement, outside of the direct suppression of the Left. In particular, this dissertation claims that the liberal framework of the civil rights movement circumscribed the Black freedom struggle internally. It was not only by cutting off the intellectual, organizational, and analytical resources from the Black left but also by foreclosing the development of Black-centered and Black-determined visions of freedom. The framework of the civil rights liberal alliance insisted on externally oriented strategies and goals, which stifled the complexity and depth of Black freedom visions within that framework. Further, it positioned liberal allies, rather than African Americans, at the center of struggle.

Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on SNCC's relationship to the civil rights liberal alliance in order to illustrate the incompatibility between liberalism and liberation. SNCC's political trajectory maps well the tensions between liberalism and Black freedom, and more specifically, demonstrates the limits of liberalism for the pursuit of liberation. I argue that the call for Black power in SNCC was not incompatible with liberalism (something that white liberals and conservatives soon realized as well), but instead, reflected a new phase in SNCC's growing political education about liberalism's limits. Not a realized revolutionary ideology, SNCC's turn to Black Power in 1966 has been called a version of ethnic pluralism. While I do not suggest an

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[19] Lieberman and Lang, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement*, 5-6.

alternative to this characterization, I do offer an amendment. SNCC's Black Power in 1966 also represented an explicit rejection of the civil rights liberal alliance within the organization.

SNCC's political transformation, including but not ending with their embrace of Black Power in 1966, represented a significant ideological and strategic break from the main tenets of the liberal civil rights framework. This break was distinct from embracing a radical ideology. Rather than subsume that break into a framework in which it does not fit, I suggest we recognize it for its "in-betweenness". As Cha-Jua and Lang have paraphrased historian David Hackett Fischer, "*the thing becoming* should not be confused with *the thing itself.*"[20] In this sense, however, "the thing becoming" should also not be overlooked. The past half-century has surely demonstrated the transformative limits of liberalism, including Democratic-controlled liberal coalitions as well as alliances with and within other institutions of hegemonic power. It has also demonstrated the immense difficulty of extracting our liberation struggles from the existing hierarchies of power that structure our lives. This challenge, rather than lull us into complacency, should demand more explicit and critical engagement with our political, cultural, interpersonal, and ideological moment as well as its history. The framework of civil rights liberalism haunts and feeds our ongoing and prospective liberation struggles, particularly within the United States. More often than not, the limits of this become invisibilized. Rather than challenge the ways our historical narratives fuel this invisibilizing tendency, our uncritical and unspecific engagement with ideology, program, and rhetoric perpetuate it. While this dissertation is a work in progress in that regard, it is also an attempt to take seriously the complexity of changing ideologies, strategies, discourses, and relationships that SNCC's turn toward Black Power entailed. In so doing, I contend that SNCC's struggle with and within the civil rights liberal alliance leading up

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[20] Cha-Jua and Lang, "'Long Movement' as Vampire," 279. See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: 1970*)*, 21.

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to, during, and after its turn towards Black Power contain key moments of usable history for how to contend with the specter of civil rights liberalism as we construct strategies of liberation in the current moment.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE CIVIL RIGHTS LIBERAL ALLIANCE

This chapter revisits the postwar relationship between civil rights and mainstream liberal politics. I argue that a particular civil rights liberal alliance emerged during this period, which had significant, though underacknowledged, implications for the trajectory of the Black freedom struggle and the political climate of the United States more broadly. Through participation in the civil rights liberal alliance, the Black freedom struggle developed unprecedented mainstream legitimacy. But the civil rights liberal alliance operated with a set of implied rules that circumscribed legitimate Black protest, vision, and goals. In this context, Black movement leaders within the alliance adhered to an orientation that emphasized Black respectability and an investment in mainstream American institutions and values. In effect, this precarious alliance put white liberal interests at the center of struggle rather than the lives, needs, and desires of Black people. In what follows I rehearse familiar historical narratives in order to frame the emergence of the postwar civil rights liberal alliance.

The civil rights movement developed in the mid-1950s through an odd convergence of Black protest activity in the form of mass nonviolent grassroots mobilization and an unprecedented alliance between the civil rights establishment and white liberals in politics and mainstream institutions. This precarious alliance between certain actors and organizations within the Black freedom struggle and mainstream power holders was mediated through claims to legitimacy through morality, patriotism, and respectability.

In his seminal study, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Sociologist Aldon D. Morris recognizes the unique form of Black protest activity that emerged during the traditional civil rights movement period. He explains:

> The modern civil rights movement broke from the protest tradition of the past in at least two crucial ways. One, it was the first time that large masses of blacks directly confronted and effectively disrupted the normal functioning of groups and institutions thought to be responsible for their oppression. The hallmark of the modern civil rights movement is that these mass confrontations were widespread and sustained over a long period of time in the face of heavy repression. Two, this was the first time in American history that blacks adopted nonviolent tactics as a mass technique for bringing about social change.[1]

Morris's understanding of the ways in which the civil rights movement was distinct from previous iterations of Black protest activity is significant: it was sustained and widespread, mass direct-action protest in the face of substantial repression and it was also the first time that nonviolence was employed as a mass strategic framework in the Black freedom struggle.

In addition to these elements, the period of the civil rights movement was also distinct because of the *confluence* of this nonviolent mass direct-action with a new relationship to postwar liberalism within the Black freedom struggle. The civil rights movement was characterized by an unprecedented alliance between mainstream civil rights organizations and outside elite allies, primarily white liberals in the federal government and mainstream institutions.

Black grassroots mobilization and other forms of protest activity have existed for centuries; however, the civil rights movement involved a strategic framework of nonviolent direct action that emphasized themes of morality and respectability *in relationship to* grassroots mobilization. That is, within the civil rights framework organizers and participants in sustained campaigns of mass direct action protest activity simultaneously had access to perceptions of legitimacy, respectability, and morality in the mainstream. Whereas participation in protest activity had generally excluded people from mainstream respectability and legitimacy in the past, this was often not the case within the particular framework of the civil rights liberal alliance.

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[1] Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: MacMillan, 1984), *x*i.

Instead, a framework of direct action protest became established through the civil rights liberal alliance which defined the boundaries of legitimate Black protest: nonviolent, moral, respectable, patriotic, in opposition to southern segregationist, and in alliance with the federal government and liberal allies, who were typically northern and white. This framework, however limited and problematic, opened a narrow space in which collective Black protest activity became legitimate and simultaneously allied with, not in opposition to, ruling party political interests. This odd alliance characterized the traditional civil rights movement period.

Black Mobilization

As countless scholars have demonstrated, the Black freedom struggle in the United States is long and vast, spanning over four centuries with myriad iterations. In this time, there have always been incidents of grassroots mobilization and a long legacy of collective action. Local people have challenged the structures of racism and exploitation that circumscribed their lives in a variety of ways. Just as in the civil rights movement, they have formed organizations, used nonviolent tactics, called out their oppression, and demanded justice. In some instances they were successful; in others, not, sometimes with dire consequences. What sets the civil rights movement apart from this longer trajectory is not the fact of their mobilization, as some narratives have suggested; instead it is the particular combination of three significant factors: 1) the widespread and sustained nature of the civil rights movement such that it became recognized as a movement; 2) the explicit use of nonviolence as a strategic movement framework; and 3) the perception of mainstream legibility, respectability, and morality among movement leaders and participants. Importantly, these respectable figures were *participating* in on the ground direct-action.

These three factors demonstrate that while there has always been Black collective action, it took on a new character through the sustained, widespread, and often self-consciously interconnected local mobilizations that were often mediated through efforts of national civil rights organizations. In this sense the self-fulfilling prophecy of the movement was meaningful: the fact that the civil rights movement conceived itself as a movement is part of what sustained and built the movement. For example, in May 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed there had been a rise of a "New Negro in the South," who was a result of the "revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself." However, Morris argues that, contrary to King's claims, most African Americans in the South had not actually developed this "New Negro" consciousness by the end of the 1950s. Instead, the term had become "an ideological byword and a self-fulfilling prophecy" used by activists "to challenge blacks to take on the responsibilities of fighting for their rights."[2]

The use of direct action within the Black community that was connected to broader conceptions of a national and even international mass movement was significant. Prior to 1950, the NAACP had spearheaded most nationally recognized Black protest activity such that the legal method was the dominant approach to challenging racial inequality in the United States. According to Morris, this approach "depended on the actions of elites external to the Black community whereby Blacks had to hope that white judges and Supreme Court justices would issue favorable rulings in response to well-reasoned and well-argued court cases." As Morris explains, one of the most important things that happened in the wake of the 1955 Montgomery

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[2] Martin Luther King, Jr., address delivered at the 2nd Anniversary of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, May 17, 1956, quoted in Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 106.

bus boycott was that it "thrust the power capable of overthrowing Jim Crow into the hands of the Black community."[3]

In addition, while there was a history of Black mobilizations using tactics associated with nonviolent direct action prior to the civil rights movement, those activists were not connecting such tactics to a larger conception of nonviolence as a specific strategy of mass resistance. The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and its offshoot, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), introduced the concept of nonviolent direct action as a strategic movement framework in the Black freedom struggle during the 1940s. However, it was not until the mid-1950s that such a framework was articulated as part of a mass mobilization. Gandhi's nonviolent direct action campaigns for Indian independence had much appeal for Black leaders, who translated Gandhian nonviolence to the Black freedom struggle in a way that aligned with the framework of civil rights liberal alliance. I elaborate this point more fully in the next chapter.[4]

Finally, while the church was always a site for unity and political activity in the African American community, there was not the same explicit dedication to the concerted and sustained use of nonviolent direct action in previous eras as during the civil rights movement. As historian Manning Marable explains, "At every level of organization, and in almost every small town where sit-ins or jail-ins occurred, black ministers were at the very center of struggle."[5] Thus, the confluence of mass mobilization, using nonviolent direct action as a strategic movement concept, and direct action leadership from within the church and other sites of mainstream legitimacy

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[3] Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999), 524.

[4] August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[5] Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, third edition (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 63.

within the Black community, created a unique moment of Black mobilization in the larger Black freedom struggle.

Opportunity and Alliance in National Politics

In addition to the specific character of Black mobilization that emerged in the 1950s, the civil rights movement was distinguished by the ways it became politically meaningful in the mainstream United States. The particularities of the historical context were driven by and at the same time also facilitated the expansion of the wave of mobilizations in the Black community into the civil rights movement. By the mid twentieth century, the Black freedom struggle was becoming politically and socially meaningful for mainstream politicians, media, and white people generally.

In part a result of earlier efforts in the Black freedom struggle, most recently the Double-V campaign during WWII, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) led by A. Philip Randolph in the 1940s, and the concerted gains of the legal battles waged by the NAACP, white people were paying new attention to Black freedom and white attitudes were slowly changing. For example, according to National Opinion Research Center polls between 1942 and 1956, rates of white approval for school integration increased from 30% to 48% and rates of white approval for desegregated housing increased from 35% to 51%. Similar trends were observed in terms of segregated transportation facilities and employment opportunity.[6]

Indeed, by the 1950s civil rights organizations began to recognize the significance of white support for their causes. According to Historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, the

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[6] National Opinion Research Center data cited in Jerome H. Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest: A Report Submitted by Jerome H. Skolnick, Director, Task Force on Violent Aspects of Protest and Confrontation of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), 181.

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) made strategic choices about campaign goals based on their perceptions of white support. By 1953-54, they explained, "equal employment opportunity did not enjoy the same legitimacy that the white public was increasingly according to the idea of equal treatment in places of public accommodation." As such, CORE chapters turned away from tackling employment discrimination and moved increasingly toward the soon-to-be dominant civil rights pursuit of desegregating public accommodations.[7]

White interest in Black civil rights had developed in relation to Black mobilizations against second-class citizen status that were linked to the larger context of World War II. As the United States justified its entrance into the "Good War," U.S. American morality was put into relief against the genocidal racism of Hitler Nazi's Germany. According to historian Manning Marable, "…popular ideology which inspired public opposition to Hitler was rooted in an anti-racist and democratic context. The blatant contradiction between the country's opposition to fascism and the *herrevolk* state and the continued existence of Jim Crow in the States after 1945 was made perfectly clear to all." In such a context, white people in the U.S. and particularly politicians were compelled to acknowledge the hypocrisy of Black discrimination in the U.S. South due to the agitation and mobilization against racism from within the Black community. "Blacks and an increasing sector of liberal white America came out of the war with a fresh determination to uproot racist ideologies and institutions at home," Marable explains. "But few at the time were precisely clear as to what measures were required to turn this egalitarian commitment into public policy."[8]

The increase in wartime Black political involvement was clear: NAACP membership grew from 250,000 in 1943 to 420,000 in 1946. Black veterans returned from war bent on

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[7] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 63.
[8] Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 13.

change. A 1946 voter registration drive resulted in eighteen thousand new African American voters in Atlanta. There were similar results in Winston-Salem, as well as the election of the first Black alderman in the South during the twentieth century. Between 1940 and 1947, the total percentage of voting age African Americans who were registered to vote in the South increased from 2 percent to 12 percent.[9]

Simultaneously, wartime economic demands helped facilitate the second Great Migration of African Americans such that the U.S. North and West gained over 2 million new African American residents during the war. Over a short period of time, African Americans who had faced discriminatory barriers to political participation in the South were suddenly a viable political constituency in the North. By the election of 1948, the political significance of these demographic shifts was becoming clear to mainstream politicians. The presidential election of 1948 has been recognized as the moment when national politicians began to consider African American votes in their political strategy. Recognizing the importance of support from a newly significant "biracial liberal coalition" of union members and urban minorities, Democratic-party liberals forced a reluctant Truman to emphasize civil rights in his campaign message. Truman's top political advisor Clark Clifford outlined a civil-rights centered "campaign blue print" and Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey advanced a platform revolt at the Democratic convention. The results were successful: Truman won the presidency with significant Black electoral support. As NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins later recalled, "The message was plain: white

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[9] Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain, eds., *Long is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 46; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2010), 219-221; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 15.

power in the South could be balanced by black power at the Northern polls. Civil Rights were squarely at the heart of national politics.'"[10]

While liberal politicians had recognized that African Americans could be valuable political allies by 1948, and though mainstream political support for civil rights was in many ways stronger than ever, the political approach to Black civil rights during the 1950s was primarily characterized by neutrality. Though many hailed the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision as a symbol of federal support for civil rights efforts, they also ignored the implications of the Supreme Court's 1955 implementation ruling, which was to desegregate with "a prompt and reasonable start" and proceed with "all deliberate speed." This ruling gave many southern white supremacists the foothold they needed to interpret "as soon as practicable" to mean "never at all". President Eisenhower demonstrated federal reluctance to support Black Freedom efforts in his repeated unwillingness to use federal authority to enforce desegregation, preferring instead to leave it to local officials and arguing that he would not presume "the judicial branch of the Government is incapable of implementing the Supreme Court's decision." Though Eisenhower never made a public statement in support of *Brown*, he was willing to publicly question the value of laws that were intended to "change men's hearts" and felt compelled to remind the nation that segregationists had for three generations been "acting in compliance with the law as interpreted by the Supreme Court of the United States under the decision of 1896."[11] Not until the election

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[10] Doug McAdam, *Political Process Model and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xix-xxi; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 14-16; Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (1982; repr., Da Capo Press, 1994), 202. The Humphrey-led platform committee maneuver resulted in South Carolina's Strom Thurmond and other committed segregationists to abandon the Democratic party and form the short lived State's Rights Democratic Party, also known as the Dixiecrats.
[11] Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 105-106.

of 1960 did mainstream political support for civil rights take on a new, more supportive character, which signaled a new phase in the civil rights liberal alliance.

While it was significant that the mainstream exhibited unprecedented favorable responses to issues of racial inequality during the civil rights movement period, it is important to state that they were not ultimately responsible for the emergence of a national movement. Resource mobilization theorists in the field of sociology might claim that the emergence of national civil rights movement was *primarily* dependent on the political context, these alliances, and their concomitant resources and supporters. But in fact it was Black community mobilization that was the primary catalyst. In line with the perspective of sociologists who promote a political process model of social movements, it is more accurate to recognize that the unique character of the civil rights movement was due *in part* to its mainstream national prominence, but the broader political context of the time does not tell the whole story. Instead, the agency within the Black community was key. Liberal allies were certainly a key ingredient for expanding the scope and standing of the civil rights movement in national discourse and consciousness, and at the same time they were also a source of limits that ultimately worked to undermine the liberating intent at the heart of the movement.[12]

Though the nature of this alliance ensured that outside elites, including sympathetic whites, the legal system, and Federal Government more broadly, would play a key role in defining the bounds of the civil rights movement, the advent of mass direct action campaigns from within the Black community meant that the balance of power had shifted. As Morris

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[12] For an example of Resource Mobilization Theory, see: John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82:6 (May 1977), 1212-1241. For the Political Process Model see: Doug McAdam, *Political Process Model and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

explains, now "massive Black protest dictated that those roles would be in response to Black collective action rather than as catalysts for change in the racial order."[13] Though outside elites would quickly learn to adapt their responses to Black protest activity in ways that expanded their own power, this shift nonetheless put Black people and their actions at the center of struggle.

Cold War Civil Rights

Just as mass mobilization in Black communities served as the catalyst for the emerging civil rights movement, the nature of national Black protest was also formed in relation to the broader political context. Historians such as Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann have argued that the emergence of the cold war in the wake of World War II had further impact on the development of the civil rights movement. U.S. claims to morality, democracy, and freedom became even more important as the U.S. faced off against the Soviet Union. The context of the cold war and global decolonization opened U.S. racism to further scrutiny on an international scale. Racism and discrimination throughout the United States, but particularly in the South, made the U.S. vulnerable to foreign critique. New critics were attuned to the hypocrisies that African Americans had recognized for centuries. This new global gaze was not lost on U.S. politicians, whose interest in Black rights expanded at this very moment.[14]

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[13] Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999), 524.

[14] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2004); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

The same factors also increased the value of morality more generally, such that any claims to morality became particularly valuable in the cold war context. This contributed to increased mainstream investment in Black interests, as the Black struggle against the immorality of racism, segregation, and discrimination would increase the moral stock of those allied with it. The moral value of allying with the Black struggle became particularly pronounced by the mid-1960s, when Historian Otis L. Graham, Jr. argues, the "intellectual and moral supremacy of liberalism in American politics seems to have reached a crest." As he explains, "The central feature of the liberal program, hesitantly begun by Kennedy and boldly pursued by Lyndon Johnson, was their sponsorship of the drive for black equality and an end to Jim Crow. The central fact of liberal political life from the sixties forward was a deeply felt moral (and intellectual) superiority."[15]

The historical context of the cold war era not only encouraged a new kind of attention to Black interests by facilitating access to morality claims; it also had a role in directing the particular values associated with Black protest activity that would come to characterize the civil rights movement. One of the most significant impacts of the cold war within the United States was the repression of the Left. Union purges accompanied the narrowing scope of labor demands. The growing anti-communist sentiment meant that political organizations were under greater scrutiny and as a result, often succumbed to heightened self-policing. Left organizations were targeted through anticommunist legislation such as the Smith Act, the McCarran Act, and the McCarran Walter Act. Collectively this legislation increased the deportation and persecution of anyone determined to be part of a subversive group and such groups were required to register with the government under threat of penalty. Cold war anticommunism hindered the Left

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[15] Otis L. Graham Jr., "Liberalism After the Sixties: A Reconnaissance," in William H. Chafe, ed., *The Achievement of American Liberalism* (2003), 294.

substantially. Left organizations experienced a massive decline in political power and membership. Black leftists were particularly impacted.[16]

There had been a close relationship between the Left and the Black freedom struggle, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s. Radical labor organizers were drawing links between economic oppression and the Black experience. As historian William H. Chafe explains, they "promoted the idea of using interracial solidarity as a vehicle for creating major economic changes, both in social welfare programs such as national health insurance, and in the sharing of decision-making power between unions and industry."[17] Black leftists, as well as many of the white radicals who had been the primary allies of African American freedom during the 1930s, helped foster the Popular Front merger of civil rights and labor interests that would become so important for liberal politicians such as President Truman in the election of 1948.[18]

Yet the new cold war context had a direct impact on the development of Black left politics. Historians Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang argue, "Just at the moment when African Americans' expectations were raised for achieving genuine equality—inspired by independence movements in Africa and Asia, thrilled by the creation of the United Nations, which gave them a wider forum in which to air their concerns, and cognizant of how World War II rhetoric further justified their claims—the Cold War and Red Scare destroyed many of the

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[16] "Introduction," in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds., *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: "Another Side of the Story* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8-9. See also: Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1988).

[17] William H. Chafe, "Race in America: The Ultimate Test of Liberalism," in *The Achievement of American Liberalism* (2003), 166.

[18] On history of left liberal alliance see Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

organizations and activists most able to articulate these claims and mobilize people to press for them."[19] McCarthy-style red baiting had a huge impact on agitators not only in labor, and various political and social organizations throughout the United States, but also specifically in the Black struggle. Black and white radicals who had been active in community organizations and civil rights groups faced new challenges. Fear of perceived communist infiltration often led to internal strife within organizations, purges of suspected communists or communist sympathizers, and collaboration with government forces to weed out possible threats.

The results of this impacted the direction of the Black freedom struggle as well as the relationship between civil rights and the Left. Cold war policing of the early civil rights movement was effective enough that civil rights organizations carefully steered clear of any association with the Left. Both CORE and the NAACP had policies explicitly banning Communist membership in their organizations, but even in groups with less official exclusions, Communists or suspected Communists were purged from the movement in large numbers. Historian Manning Marable suggests that because of these purges the Black freedom struggle lost many of "the most principled anti-racist organizers and activists," and moved closer toward "accept[ing] the prevailing xenophobia of the times.'"[20] Chafe argues that this significantly influenced the direction of the civil rights movement such that, "the focus on economic and systemic change as a solution to racial inequality faded into oblivion, and more and more of the energies of civil rights groups went into legal challenges, within the constitutional structure, to patterns of segregation."[21]

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[19] Lieberman and Lang, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement*, 3.
[20] Manning Marable, quotes in Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 9.
[21] Chafe, "Race in America," 166.

While anticommunist repression encouraged Black organizations to actively separate themselves from Left critiques of U.S. racism, other historical factors contributed to the development of the new kind of civil rights movement context. American civil rights issues grew in national significance throughout the 1950s in relation to the swath of NAACP legal victories, most prominently the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Not only did this exacerbate tensions between southern and northern white politicians over segregation, it also elicited increased white anxiety about the maintenance of white supremacy in the South.[22] In the wake of *Brown*, white fears stimulated the formation of White Citizens Councils in various locations throughout the South, who were partially responsible for a widespread crackdown on African American civil rights organizations, and targeted the NAACP almost exclusively. However, one unintended result of this political shut down was that Black organizers who had been working through the NAACP began to shift their organizational ties. In the absence of the NAACP, black church-based mobilizations began to emerge in new ways throughout the South. This had a direct impact on the church-centered character of the burgeoning civil rights movement.[23]

The decline in NAACP leadership throughout the South as well as the growing significance of anticommunist sentiment both contributed to the emergence of mass mobilizations out of the Black church. As southern white repression was limiting the power of local NAACP branches and national cold war politics limited the functionality of leaders and organizations suspected of being connected to the Left, a new emphasis on nonviolent direct

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[22] Growing tensions became clear in 1956 when all but three southern Congressmen had pledged to maintain segregation at all costs in their "Southern Manifesto." See Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 41.

[23] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street.*

action was developing among Black leaders and organizations often being mobilized through the church.

In many ways cold war anticommunism underlined the already liberal-oriented direction of the movement. However, in spite of evidence to the contrary, heightened cold war policing of communist sympathizers continued. As historian Jeff Woods explained, "Southern red and black investigators simply ignored the mountains of evidence proving that the movement was fundamentally liberal and committed to working within the limits of capitalism and the American democratic system."[24] Purges and tacit compliance with cold war anticommunism within the civil rights mainstream ensured this was the case.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, a student activist and SNCC leader, remembered something similar. After being brought into the Deans office at Spelman College for participating in some of the early Atlanta student sit-ins in the 1960s, she recalled being asked by Spelman president, Dr. Albert E. Manley "…if I were a Communist and if I had been sent to foment dissent and chaos on the campus." Her response was confusion. "A Communist? I hardly knew what they was. A *paid* instigator? Boy, I was as poor as Job's turkey with hardly a penny to my name. I wished somebody *were* paying me to catch the hell I was catching."[25]

The fact that many mainstream civil rights organizations had effectively cut ties with the Left by the 1960s reflected their growing awareness that mainstream support depended on it. Lieberman and Lang explain that the message was clear: "challenging cold war priorities by

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[24] Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 9.
[25] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," in Faith Holsaert, et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 21.

fighting racial injustice and criticizing U.S. foreign policy were out of bounds if one wanted a comfortable place in the postwar world."[26]

Woods explains this further: "Americans of the 1950s and 1960s regarded Communism as an even greater evil than southern racism. They found it hypocritical and untenable for movement advocates to defend civil liberties of American blacks while accepting aid from Communists whom they inevitably identified with totalitarian restraints on the same liberties." In such a context, some civil rights organizations were forced to choose. They recognized clearly that in spite of the long history of Left involvement in the Black struggle, liberals, rather that radicals, "were far more powerful, numerous, and helpful" at meeting their "immediate movement goals" and distancing themselves from "overt Marxists" would garner necessary "general public support."[27]

In this way, civil rights leaders became increasingly aware that infusing the Black freedom struggle with patriotism, anticommunism, and a general air of respectability was central. The movement shifted concertedly. This, combined with the developing church-centered nature of Black protest struggles, created a civil rights movement that valued respectability, morality, and patriotism to an unprecedented degree. As the larger political context changed to reflect cold war politics, white alliance with the Black freedom struggle became increasingly contingent on African American patriotism, respectability, and anticommunism.

Respectability

Many scholars of African American history recognize how conceptions of African American respectability have been used to both justify and challenge systemic white supremacy

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[26] Lieberman and Lang, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement*, 3.

[27] Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 9-10.

in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians document how white anxieties about Black people stepping out of their perceived societal roles have been a primary justification for the systemic racialized violence enacted against African Americans in the Jim Crow South. In the same way, organized efforts in the Black community to combat systemic white supremacy have often relied on rhetoric that emphasizes Black respectability, morality, and worthiness.

Scholars like historian Danielle McGuire argue that against the backdrop of the cold war, the confluence of anticommunism, white supremacy, and sexualized paranoia/propaganda in white responses to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had a significant impact on the development of the Black freedom struggle. White Citizens Councils expanded such that by 1956 membership numbers topped 20,000 in Louisiana, 40,000 in South Carolina, 60,000 in Georgia, and 75,000 in Mississippi.[28] Rather than targeted racialized violence, White Citizens Councils drew on their political and economic power to police the bounds of white supremacy. They published the names of Black people who attempted to register to vote in local papers, pressured employers and landlords to fire or evict "undesirable" African Americans, and even used their influence to have their bank loans and mortgages withdrawn. Their primary concerns, they argue, centered on Black sexuality.[29]

McGuire contends that responses to *Brown v. Board of Education* drew on longstanding fears about Black sexual access to white women. Black and white children attending the same school opened the door to the possibility of developing future relationships, marriage, and worst of all, sex. White opponents of *Brown* believed school integration had less to do with quality education than it did with sexual access to white women. This fear had fueled white commitment

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[28] Jack Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement,* 108.
[29] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street.*

to segregation for decades and continued in their opposition to *Brown*. This had a significant impact on the Black freedom struggle. Prior to 1954, McGuire claims, Black middle class organizations more willingly rallied around working class figures, particularly women who had been the victims of sexual violence at the hands of whites. After Brown, an emphasis on respectability resurged. The most recognized example of this was the reluctance of Black leaders in Montgomery to launch their boycott of segregated busses around young, working class women such as Claudette Colvin, who was one of a few women who had refused to give up her seat months prior to Rosa Parks. Colvin, a pregnant teenager from one of the poorest areas of town, was an unacceptable symbol of their mobilization. Instead, they waited for Rosa Parks, who McGuire contends, was chosen more for her solid image of Black middle class respectability than her long and impressive history of Black organizing. Though Parks was a seamstress, her age as well as her church and political connections afforded her the image of respectability. Black activists recognized that amidst growing white anxiety about Black sexuality and its perceived threat to white power, a significant part of the struggle would rest on whether African Americans could be seen as deserving of legal protection. This is one of the reasons that respectability emerged at the center of Black freedom efforts in the civil rights movement.[30]

The significance of respectability drew on the efforts of Black activists during World War II to link Black civil rights with expressions of patriotism and legality. For example, in 1944, one of the earliest student civil rights groups, the Civil Rights Committee of Washington D.C., which was sponsored by the Howard University Student Chapter of the NAACP, developed a pamphlet that outlined a pledge of commitment for students who wanted to participate in the Committee's campaign in "the art of persuasion and good will" and

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[30] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street.*

"developing…public opinion to extend the privilege of service to all members of the population." The pamphlet demonstrated the importance of coupling calls for protest activity with clear expressions of respectability, patriotism, and respect for the law. In the pledge, the student agreed to abide the rules of the Committee as well as to "do nothing to antagonize members of public or the management of public places." In addition, they also pledged to "look my best whenever I act as a representative of the Committee, to use dignity and restraint at all times; to refrain from any boisterous or offensive language or conduct no matter what the provocation, and to do or say nothing which will embarrass the Committee or the University."[31]

Such calls for respectable behavior drew heavily on themes of nationalism and patriotism in justification for equal access to public accommodations. The pamphlet framed discrimination as "undemocratic," and "contrary to the principles for which the present World War is being fought." Further, drawing on larger themes in WWII Black protest, the pamphlet explained the fight against racial discrimination as a "patriotic duty and an act of faith in the American boys who are fighting for the Four Freedoms in foreign lands, and who have every right to expect a fuller share of these freedoms when they return home."[32]

It is also noteworthy that the Civil Rights Committee was deeply invested in acting in accordance with the law. Because they were challenging discrimination in public accommodations in Washington D.C., the Civil Rights Committee was not breaking any local, state, or national laws. The fact that there no law enforcing segregation in Washington D.C. was significant. Their sit-ins and other demonstrations were contingent on the fact that they were not

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[31] Leaflet circulated by Civil Rights Committee sponsored by the Howard University chapter of the NAACP, April 25, 1944. Mimeographed. Copy in CORE Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, reproduced in August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and Francis I. Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1971), 246-247.

[32] Leaflet circulated by Civil Rights Committee.

pushing to violate the law and the pamphlet asked students to pledge that they would enter and remain in a public place only "as long as I conduct myself in a lawful and proper manner." Further, while the pamphlet claimed the "right of equal privileges in all places of public accommodation" was "one of the most precious of all human rights," they were also clear to note that the group was most opposed to discrimination or exclusion based on race or color that was "not sanctioned by laws." In effect, the pamphlet emphasized the legality of discrimination more than the morality of it.[33]

The tension between abiding laws and challenging injustice continued to be a central concern within the civil rights movement, which depended on claims to morality, respectability, and mainstream validity. Coretta Scott King remembers the feeling of anxiety when during the 1962 SCLC campaign in Albany, Georgia the city attorney got a *federal* court order to prevent demonstrations. This was the first time that King remembered being in opposition to the federal government. "When the federal court started ruling against us," King explained, "that created a whole different thing in terms of strategy." Before that, she said, they "had been willing to break state laws that were unjust laws, and our ally was the federal judiciary." But now "if we would take our case to the federal court, and the federal court ruled against us, what recourse did we have?"[34] Being in accord with federal laws allowed civil rights activists to maintain a kind of public legitimacy while violating local or state laws that enforced segregation in the South. For King and others in the civil rights movement, the absence of federal backing was not only a logistical challenge; it also threatened their claims to morality and legitimacy.

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[33]Leaflet circulated by Civil Rights Committee.

[34] Coretta Scott King, in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990)*, 111*.

Yet the preoccupation among early civil rights leaders with legitimacy and respectability was not always shared, particularly among younger civil rights activists. SNCC's James Forman recalled a divide that was apparent among some student activists and those they called "adults" around the time of the Freedom Rides in Nashville 1961. Outside of a few exceptions, such as CORE's national director James Farmer, who had gone to and remained in jail with the Freedom Riders in Jackson, MS, the students were very critical of "the so-called big name leaders who seemed to spend so much time in the Statler Hilton."[35] SNCC's Diane Nash, who thought very highly of Martin Luther King, Jr. in general, pointed to the fact that he had "been affected by a lot of middle-class standards," and because of that, she argued, despite the fact that he was "a good man," he left "a lot to be desired" as the "symbol of the movement."[36] Perceptions among young SNCC activists like Forman and Nash presaged the growing critique of liberal values and alliances that would emerge explicitly within SNCC over the next few years.

Yet in spite of these critiques, many student activists were not so far removed from King. As historian Manning Marable explains, "racial reform in the South was not an aberration of bourgeois democracy; it was its fulfillment. Sit-ins were no rejection of the American Dream; they were the necessary although ambiguous steps taken towards it culmination."[37] SNCC Freedom Rider Elizabeth Hirshfield recalled flying over Washington D.C. on her way to Nashville in 1961: "…we went right over the national monuments. I looked out of the window, at all the key places, and I thought, 'this is really what being an American is all about,' going on the Freedom Rides. Making America the way Lincoln and Washington meant it to be. That may

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[35] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; repr., Washington DC: Open Hand, 1985), 147.

[36] Diane Nash, quoted in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 148.

[37] Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 63.

have been kind of naïve, but it was really a fundamental part of what made me go down there. To do what I did was to be an American."[38]

Student activists' understanding of how their challenges to segregation and racial discrimination related to U.S. American values, institutions, and practices fluctuated, diverged, and certainly changed over time. Among other things, this reflected the palpable instability that was just under the surface of the emerging civil rights liberal alliance.

The Dialectic of Civil Rights Liberal Alliance

Mid-twentieth century developments such as the growing significance of African American voters in national politics, the wave of legal victories from the NAACP, and the backdrop of the cold war were all part of an historical context that contributed to both a new kind of political opportunity for African Americans and also continued racial oppression. The combination had a significant impact on Black mobilization. The precarious mix of new mainstream legibility for the Black freedom struggle was counterbalanced by continual reminders of entrenched white supremacy. This duality encouraged African Americans to have faith in the potential for mainstream channels to be a conduit for political change and at the same time reinforced the idea that agitation was necessary for any real change to occur. These twin realities helped to shape the mid-century civil rights movement.

It resulted in a movement with a new intensity of Black protest that was simultaneously deeply committed to U.S. American values and politics. As Historian William H. Chafe explains, "…they wished to join, not destroy or subvert, the existing structures of society," and "believed that making their case fairly, showing their good faith as citizens, they could prove the merits of

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[38] Elizabeth Hirshfeld, quoted in Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 54.

being accorded equal opportunity."[39] This faith in the idea of proving to white U.S. America that Black people deserved rights was not only present in the rhetoric of moderate civil rights leaders. James Forman, one of SNCC's most influential activists whose politics often challenged the liberal civil rights framework, recalled his awakening to the potential power of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s. Though he expressed his sentiments quite differently than moderate civil rights leaders, he nonetheless reflected a faith in the capacity to persuade a change of heart: "We got to take the man's education, his contradictions, and throw that shit back into his face hard and furious," Forman explained:

> Every time we can, hit him with some of his own shit. We got to know his history and we certainly got to know ours. Tell him about his revolution 'cause he was being mistreated. We got a right to ours too. Tell him about his speeches for liberty and death. We can make ours too. Tell him about his documents talking about liberty and equality for all. Hell, we in the *all*, too; so shape up, baby.[40]

Though Forman was primarily drawn to the civil rights movement as a way to mobilize the consciousness of the Black community, he also expressed a desire to "embarrass the American image by playing on the contradictions inherent in this society."[41]

Though activists often had different emphases, their general faith in the system was reinforced when President Eisenhower ordered the National Guard to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 to enforce the desegregation of public schools. "The symbolic importance of Little Rock was lost on no one," SNCC volunteer Mary Aickin Rothschild recalled. "For the first time since Reconstruction federal troops were in the South to protect of the rights of blacks." This display of federal intervention terrified many white southerners and, combined with the "nascent

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[39] William H. Chafe, "Race in America,"170.
[40] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 108.
[41] Ibid., 113.

nonviolent movement of blacks throughout the region," signaled a "new level of action" in the civil rights movement by the end of the decade.[42]

However, in spite of the hope Eisenhower's actions in Little Rock may have signaled to some, his actions were still at the expense of his own deep reluctance to get involved. Historians have argued that the real reason Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock had nothing to do with his support for integration but instead was because he had felt his authority had been challenged by Governor Orval Faubus.[43] In fact, Eisenhower's general response to the issue of school desegregation following the *Brown* decision reflected what Historian William E. Leuchtenburg called his "empty pulpit" presidency. Indeed, Eisenhower made a point to avoid involving the federal government in what were deemed "local racial situations," calling it "just plain nuts" to use force in opposition to "racial customs." As Leuchtenburg explains further, "It is not too much to say that a great deal of the violence, as well as the fearfully slow rate of compliance after 1954, may be laid at Eisenhower's door."[44]

Thus, the symbolic importance of Eisenhower's actions in Little Rock occurred amidst a larger context of what historians have called an era of neutrality on civil rights issues during the 1950s. Such a context reinforced the simultaneous notion that change was possible and also that much more was needed. We can see an early example of this dynamic in the 1940s in which President Truman's response to increased Black agitation after WWII was to appoint a Committee on Civil Rights, and to back the recommendations of their report, "To Secure These Rights," which called for such things as the desegregation of the armed forces and abolishing poll taxes. In addition, Truman became the first U.S. president to address a national meeting of

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[42] Mary Aickin Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964-1965* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 5.
[43] Chafe, "Race in America," 167.
[44] William E. Leuchtenburg, quoted in Chafe, "Race in America," 167-168.

the NAACP. Such efforts offered hope to African Americans that their pursuit of justice and rights would find support in mainstream politics.[45] Yet at the same time, white racism persisted in a variety of explicit forms from lynching and rampant segregation. "Precisely because of this chemistry—small but important breakthroughs existing side by side with pervasive reminders of second-class citizenship," Chafe explained, "black Americans intensified their protest."[46] In this way, the precarious balance of support and limits, the interface between opportunity and action, the potential for success combined with the repeated reminder that racial barriers existed and needed to be challenged, created a civil rights movement with Black freedom dreams circumscribed by the possibilities and limits of liberal alliance.

Conclusion

The civil rights-liberal alliance that emerged during the postwar, cold war period depended on direct action but was led by respectable leaders. It employed protest but enacted it toward patriotism. Black visions of freedom were part of a larger oppositional logic, but they were for the time being deeply aligned with liberal interests. In this way, they became less opposition, more "American," and importantly, more invested in the power of perception: how the Black struggle would be seen by its potential allies and supporters.

This power of perception was critical. Geographer Bruce D'Arcus argues that in the context of the civil rights movement, "dismantling the system" required "undo[ing] its very logic." This meant in part, "creatively transform[ing] everyday spaces—lunch counters, bus seats, jail cells—into contested political spaces," but also gaining "access to the larger spatial

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[45] William E. Leuchtenburg, quoted in Chafe, "Race in America," 165.
[46] Ibid., 163.

spheres of mediated symbols."[47] Media, and particularly television, D'Arcus argues, were central to this project. Civil rights protests in the South, he claims, "were distinguished by their visibility far beyond the specific sites of protest," something "made particularly clear in 1963 in Birmingham, AL, where confrontations between protest marchers and an aggressive police force directed by 'Bull' Connor became big news." However, as D'Arcus explains, "such political spectacles only mattered in the context of a potentially sympathetic audience." Thus, the strategic and tactical choices made in the civil rights movement meant that undoing the logic of white supremacy required some kind of mass appeal.[48]

Unlike the legal battles waged by the NAACP, the mass mobilization of protest activity in the direct-action phase of civil rights movement operated outside of what Journalist Edward P. Morgan calls the "normal political processes of representative democracy." As Morgan explains, "People resort to protest when their claims and grievances are not being addressed by the legitimate political authorities—when they are effectively voiceless within the polity." In this way, Morgan suggests, protest is necessarily outside of the bounds of legitimacy and "from the vantage point of political officials and mainstream media, all protest is a form of outsider activity." As such, while U.S. Americans value the right to protest in theory, and while historically protest shaped important aspects of U.S. society, usually, Morgan contends, "the majority of Americans are predisposed to disapprove of specific protests."[49]

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[47] Bruce D'Arcus, *Boundaries of Dissent: Protest and State Power in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-2.

[48] Bruce D'Arcus, *Boundaries of Dissent*, 2.

[49] Edward P. Morgan, *What Really Happened to the 1960s? How Mass Media Culture Failed American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 41. This disconnect between theoretical and actual support of protest might help explain how our popular historical memory of the civil rights movement could be largely celebratory, while most people in the U.S. were most likely skeptical or disapproving during the time itself.

Yet the protest activity of the civil rights movement had both mass appeal and national significance. Further, it was led by leaders who could claim a semblance of respectability and were deeply invested in the normal processes of society. As a result, in the civil rights movement acting outside the normal bounds of the U.S. democratic process was framed alongside rhetoric of inclusion and celebration of "American democracy." In this way, civil rights movement leaders worked hard to undo the logic of white supremacy through the power of perception while maintaining claims to legitimacy. In this regard, influencing people's ideas was essential. As D'Arcus explains, "The discursive and performative orders that distinguish a protest from both a riot and casual gatherings on a street are not matters of fact, but expressions of often complex ideas about the relationship between dissent, order, and democratic practice."[50] In this same way, civil rights activists relied on their own claims to legitimacy and drew a careful and strategic line that connected themes of dissent, order, and democratic practice in a way that was palatable to mainstream white Americans.

This is how the civil rights-liberal alliance emerged from and depended on the precarious confluence of mainstream legibility, political opportunity, and mass nonviolent direct action protest. The movement was growing, but only as long as it maintained its political allegiances and cultural commitments to respectability and legitimacy. Respectability and legitimacy were maintained primarily through appealing to national values and assuaging white liberal anxiety. Black demands for equality gained traction as long as they did not threaten white political and social power, at least outside of the South. A key part of this was remaining steadfast in their dedication to nonviolence. The use of direct action in the civil rights movement was more easily understood to be legitimate if it was respectable, patriotic, moral, and nonviolent. The following

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[50] Bruce D'Arcus, *Boundaries of Dissent*, 6.

chapter explores the important role of nonviolence as a strategic framework of the civil rights movement that facilitated the civil rights liberal alliance and solidified the movement's cultural and social allegiances to respectability, morality, and legitimacy.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE ORIGINS OF NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT

Nonviolence has become one of the defining characteristics of the civil rights movement; furthermore it is the primary theme that has allowed us to celebrate the civil rights movement in our historical narratives. While Martin Luther King, Jr. is the predominant figure to symbolize the use of nonviolence in the U.S. civil rights movement, Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi symbolizes the ideological/philosophical origins of that nonviolence. The ways in which Gandhian nonviolence has been understood and implemented in the U.S. civil rights movement has had a significant impact on the trajectory of the movement and on our contemporary understandings of the function of nonviolent protest in the present day.

This chapter explores the origins of Gandhian nonviolence in the civil rights movement. I argue that a particular version of Gandhian nonviolence was translated into the U.S. civil rights movement primarily through the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and its parent organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). This translation was heavily influenced by their commitment to interracialism and Christian-pacifism. Though these early followers of Gandhi did not misinterpret Gandhian philosophy, their own positionality and ideological underpinnings encouraged specific interpretations of Gandhian philosophy that emphasized some aspects over others. In particular, this chapter argues that early translations from CORE and the FOR contributed to a framework of Gandhian nonviolence in the civil rights movement that functioned strategically, primarily as a means of influencing the oppressor through efforts of negotiation and moral suasion. In this process, their interpretations underemphasized one of the most important aspects of Gandhian philosophy: a primary concern with the internal transformation of oppressed people.

Internal Transformation in Gandhi's Satyagraha

Gandhi wrote and spoke prolifically on the concept of nonviolence as a philosophy of life and method of social change. He articulated a vision of nonviolence that was highly complex, rooted in a combination of spirituality and politics. Though Gandhi was a complicated and often contradictory political figure, his framework of nonviolent direct action influenced mass mobilizations across the world. Throughout all of Gandhi's articulations of nonviolence, he put a primary emphasis on the ways in which nonviolence could facilitate the internal transformation of individuals and communities.

This was clear in his concept of nonviolent direct action, *satyahgraha*, which he first put into practice while living in Johannesburg in 1906. The South African government had just passed new legislation, known as the "Black Act," which increased the surveillance and criminalization of Indians in South Africa. Gandhi and a group of 3000 Transvaal Indians engaged in mass civil disobedience as a response, which he later said is what catalyzed his belief in the power of *satyagraha*. The essence of *satyagraha* was to Gandhi "holding on to Truth…soul or spirit," he called this, "Truth-force," or "pure soul-force." Political Scientist Dennis Dalton describes *satyagraha* as a method of nonviolent action based on the idea that "a community's overcoming fear and recovery of self-respect could come through collective nonviolence." In Gandhi's view, the purpose of nonviolent direct action, or *satyagraha*, was primarily in the service of personal and community growth, of transformation that was internally-focused rather than directed outward. In this understanding, *satyagraha* was about

one's own sense of self, or one's community's self-image, more so than it was about the impact on the forces external.[1]

For Gandhi, the blending of political action with a sense of internal transformation and self-consciousness through *satyagraha* was deeply connected to his conception of freedom, what he called *swaraj*. Like *satyagraha*, Gandhi's *swaraj* was a multifaceted concept that mixed the personal and political and reflected the importance of the internal. *Swaraj* blended a political notion of freedom with a more personal and spiritual conceptualization, which drew on longstanding Indian notions from Sanskrit and Hindu texts. A Sanskrit word, *Swaraj* originally has two distinct meanings. One use of *swaraj* connoted political sovereignty, or freedom from external political control while the other referred to a personal sense of freedom, freedom from illusion or ignorance, freedom to develop greater self-knowledge and mastery. Gandhi combined this understanding of *swaraj* with another notion of freedom from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the holiest book of Hinduism. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* freedom meant spiritual liberation and freedom from delusion. It also understood the path to such freedom to be self-discipline, a control of focus that would allow one to see more clearly. Gandhi incorporated these understandings of freedom into his concept of *swaraj*, which was at once an expression of political and spiritual liberation: freedom from external control, freedom to develop self-knowledge and avoid delusion, and freedom to be in control of your own life. For Gandhi, the relationship between *swaraj* and *satyagraha* was essential. He developed the connection between them in his first major writing, *Hind Swaraj*, or "Indian Independence," written in 1909. In it, Gandhi argued that true *swaraj* required "self-rule or self-control," and, he explained, "the way to it is *satyagraha*: the power of

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[1] Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi, "Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience, Passive Resistance, Non-Co-operation," March 23, 1921 in Dennis Dalton, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 50, 52; Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 9-10.

truth and love." Indeed, in Gandhi's understanding, achieving freedom from British rule meant achieving *swaraj*, which, he said, had nothing to do with war, battles, violence, or arms. As he explained, "the sword is entirely useless for holding India." The first step was to "cultivate fearlessness."[2]

Themes such as "self-rule," "cultivat[ing] fearlessness," and "recover[ing] self respect," were at the heart of Gandhi's *satyagraha* and *swaraj*, and reflected an understanding of nonviolent direct action whose primary purpose was internal transformation: focusing on the impact of direct action on the hearts and minds of the individual actor and their community, rather than their adversary. To be sure, Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent direct action was not exclusively internally focused. It also included elements of strategy, politics, and outside-oriented action. However, Gandhi spent a good deal of time thinking through the differences between these sets of goals. One way that Gandhi made sense of this is through his own distinctions between the concepts of *satyagraha* and *duragraha*.

Gandhi's distinction between *satyagraha* and *duragraha* illustrates clearly the differences between nonviolence for the purpose of internal transformation and nonviolence as a form of persuasion, influence, or bias. Initially, after *satyagraha* came into use following the civil disobedience campaigns in South Africa, Gandhi and others described the term as "passive resistance." However, Gandhi quickly came to reject that explanation, believing it failed to "convey the active power of nonviolence." Instead, he saw passive resistance as a better descriptor for *duragraha*, which Gandhi called "the force of bias." The *duragrahi*, Gandhi suggested, could employ the tactics of nonviolent direct action, but solely as a strategic measure

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[2] Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 11; Gandhi quote from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Dehli: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961), 64.

aimed at influencing or persuading the adversary. As Dalton explains, "The passive resistor or *duragrahi* may avoid physical violence yet still harbor enmity and anger within, using nonviolence as a tactic but lacking commitment to its core values of understanding, openness, and respect for the adversary."[3] Thus for Gandhi, "passive resistance," a term that also came to lose favor among the most dedicated Gandhian followers in the civil rights movement, reflected a more strategic approach to nonviolent direct action, which he described as *duragraha.* And importantly, Gandhi's distinction between *satyagraha* and *duragraha* returned to the question of inward rather than outward focus. If *duragraha* was the "force of bias," it suggested the primary use of passive resistance was to persuade and influence others, while the primary purpose of *satyagraha* was in how it impacted the individual actor herself.

While Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy put primacy on internal transformation, the predominant emphasis of nonviolence that emerged in the U.S. civil rights movement was external. Early followers of Gandhi in the United States introduced versions of Gandhian nonviolence that minimized its inward focus in favor of a kind of nonviolent direct action that was primarily strategic.

Gandhian Nonviolence in CORE and FOR

Some of the first interpretations of Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy used in the Black freedom struggle came through activists from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and its parent organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Though African Americans had been using nonviolent tactics, particularly boycotts, since at the least the 19th century, historians August Meier and Elliott Rudwick have argued that such early mobilizations lacked "a self-

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[3] Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 10.

conscious strategy or ideology of nonviolent direct action," which, they claim, "was a creation of the twentieth century." Indeed, even well into the twentieth century, Black organizations were using nonviolent tactics to fight for the expansion of civil rights without linking them explicitly to the concept of nonviolence or nonviolent direct-action. However, by the 1940s, more than a decade prior to the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, a self-conscious strategy of nonviolence emerged in the Black freedom struggle, inspired by Gandhi, and "pioneered" through the activity of the CORE and FOR.[4]

CORE was formed in 1942 by a small group of young activists in Chicago with ties to the FOR, a Christian-pacifist organization. The FOR's longstanding pacifist tradition in the United States dated back to World War I and gained particular prominence among students during the 1930s. According to CORE's founders, this decade was known as the "pacifist era," in which "the trend in pacifist-Christian circles was on nonviolence as an alternative to violence." In such a context, they explained, "[i]t was natural that this was combined with Gandhism."[5]

Yet while the young activists' burgeoning interest in Gandhian nonviolence drew on the pacifist traditions of the FOR, it also reflected a new context for political activism. A growing "pro-war" sentiment had developed among many former Christian-pacifists after U.S. entry into World War II, which significantly slowed the growth of pacifism in the United States after the 1930s. However, the "Good War" had also contributed to increased awareness of racial

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[4] August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 3. While CORE was the first group to self-consciously form around the notion of applying Gandhian nonviolence to the Black struggle in the United States, Meier and Rudwick note that there were others who "employed Gandhian tactics independently." For example, CORE founder James Farmer was familiar with "a group of white pacifist college students who, inspired by Gandhi, lived on a cooperative farm near Cleveland and, working with an NAACP youth council, during the summer of 1941 successfully integrated a public swimming pool, in the face of a hostile white crowd." See Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 14.

[5] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 6.

inequality in the United States, particularly in the context of the military. Most of the young activists who formed CORE were part of the now-smaller group of young pacifists, connected to the FOR, who had continued their ideological commitments and "social idealism" into the 1940s. Building off of the growing concern over racism in the United States developing against the backdrop of World War II, these dedicated young pacifists began to connect these themes more directly with what had previously been a primarily "philosophical opposition to war" within the FOR. Though the FOR had long been concerned with questions of race, their primary investment had always been pacifism.

The FOR's national leader, A.J. Muste, recruited a young African American pacifist, Bayard Rustin, to work as a youth secretary for the FOR in summer 1941. Muste sought to make the FOR the central site for peace and human rights oriented nonviolent direct action campaigns in the nation. Rustin was particularly interested in mobilizing African Americans to use nonviolent direct action as a way take on racial discrimination and segregation. Reporting on the mindset of African Americans at the time, Rustin told the FOR leadership, "No situation in America has created so much interest among Negroes as the Gandhian proposals for India's freedom." He believed Black people were ready: "The suffering which the Negro has already endured fits him well for the disciplines necessary for nonviolent direct action." In such a context, Rustin pushed the FOR to take on racial discrimination more directly, explaining: "In the face of this tension and conflict, our responsibility is to put the technique of nonviolent direct action into the hands of the black masses…."[6]

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[6] Bayard Rustin, "Bayard Rustin to the FOR Staff," memorandum, September 12, 1941, in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 7; second Rustin quotation on p.5.

It was not only Rustin who helped put racial justice on the agenda of the FOR, a small group of young FOR activists formed a "race relations cell" near the University of Chicago in October 1941, and sought to more fully integrate their commitment to pacifism and social change with their goals of racial equality. They were particularly interested in "applying Gandhian principles to racial problems." A few months later, in spring 1942, four members of the race relations cell and two FOR staff members who had been actively working with them formed the first chapter of CORE, the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality. They began to apply methods of nonviolent direct action in their pursuit of interracial equality.[7]

Because early CORE activists were, in CORE founder Bernice Fisher's words, "afire with the ideas of Gandhian nonviolence," they sought to follow Gandhi's teachings as faithfully as possible. CORE took this commitment very seriously, creating an "Action Discipline," which set out their modified approach to Gandhian nonviolence. CORE members were required to accept the "Action Discipline" and "be well versed in the principles of nonviolent philosophy." The primary text that early CORE activists relied on was Krishnalal Shridharini's *War without Violence*, which Fisher recalls they "studied and debated, chapter by chapter." Shridharini, who CORE founder, James Farmer, called "a disciple of Gandhi," had participated with Gandhi in the famous Salt March in April 1930. CORE was deeply influenced by Shridharini and they invited him to speak at CORE's first conference in June 1943. *War without Violence* was a description of Gandhi's philosophy and "an analysis and outline of Gandhi's method of nonviolent direct action." The methods and concepts in Shridharini's interpretation were very influential on the

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[7] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 4, 6. Meier and Rudwick note that the 1940 election of A.J. Muste, a former labor activist and "radical reformer," to the FOR's chief executive position also played a key role in facilitating the shift away from a purely philosophical opposition to war and toward social justice oriented nonviolent direct action. Though initially the group was called the Committee of Racial Equality, CORE changed its name to the Congress of Racial Equality in 1944. See Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 18.

young CORE activists. As Fisher explained, "Reading *War without Violence* was a prerequisite in the early days."[8]

In CORE's interpretation of Shridharini, Gandhi's approach contained "three basic and essential steps: …investigation (to get the facts), negotiation (to try and solve the problem in face-to-face discussions), and direct action."[9] As Meier and Rudwick interpreted it, "Gandhi's method was to start with an attempt to convert the opponent through negotiations and then successively move on to more militant actions."[10] One of CORE's first attempts at Gandhian direct action was a sit-in they staged in 1941-42 at Jack Spratt, a south-side Chicago coffee shop that had been refusing service to African Americans. Farmer recalled how closely the young activists tried to follow Shridharini's teaching on Gandhian methods early on, which he attributed in part to them "still being neophytes." As a first step, the group "reviewed Shridharini to discover what our procedure might be" and made a plan based on Gandhi's methods. Accordingly, the group set out to first gather all the facts, then attempt negotiation. If that failed, they planned to issue an ultimatum and finally, as a last step, they would initiate nonviolent direct action. The young activists followed this outline to the letter.[11]

Yet, while early members of CORE worked hard to accurately translate and implement Gandhi's teachings in the U.S., their translation was necessarily incomplete. As Meier and Rudwick explain, "In borrowing this procedure, the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality

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[8] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 6-12; Krishnalal Shridharini, *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939); James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 9, 112.

[9] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 9.

[10] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 11.

[11] James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 60-62, in August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and Francis I. Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., (Indianapolis and new York: The Boobs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1971), 243-246. First ed. published 1965.

omitted certain actions in the series." These omissions demonstrated the modifying impact that CORE had on the interpretation of Gandhian nonviolence in the U.S. Some of these omissions were primarily procedural. For example, Gandhi's method suggested that if initial attempts to negotiate and arouse public opinion failed, the appropriate next step would be "parades and other colorful demonstrations." In CORE's translation, however, outside of the sporadic "poster walk," parades dropped out of the process, in part, perhaps, due to the small number of people involved in the organization early on. Similarly, another step in Gandhi's process encouraged activists to "perform rites of prayer and fasting to purify themselves of their own guilt arising from their previous failure to resist evil practices." Yet like parades, the "rites of self-purification were discarded as inapplicable in the United States." In the same vein, the final step of Gandhi's procedure, if all other avenues had failed, was to engage in civil disobedience. However, CORE's literature made no mention of civil disobedience as part of the process. Meier and Rudwick speculate this might have been to avoid "[frightening] potential recruits," or else because CORE was operating primarily in areas that were by and large "covered by state civil rights laws," thus making civil disobedience an irrelevant tactic. Yet the absence of civil disobedience may also have symbolized a wider reluctance among early CORE activists to engage in direct action protest unless absolutely necessary. More often than not, CORE chapters remained unwilling to move beyond attempts at negotiation when confronting racial discrimination.[12]

As this suggests, CORE not only consciously abandoned certain elements of Gandhi's direct action procedure in the belief that it was not applicable to the U.S. context, they also, not surprisingly, drew on their own interests and values when translating Gandhian philosophy.

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[12] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 12.

These emphases, I argue, have had a significant impact on the dominant interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence in the United States.

Interracialism

The explicit emphasis on internal transformation in Gandhi's philosophy would suggest that interpretations of *satyagraha* in the United States also put primacy on the impact of nonviolent direct action on the oppressed. However, the initial interpretation of Gandhian nonviolence that was translated to the Black freedom struggle through CORE infused *satyagraha* with their own emphases that often worked against Gandhi's internally-oriented focus. Instead, CORE's emphasis on interracialism explicitly de-emphasized a Black-centered approach to the pursuit of Black freedom.

CORE's explicit emphasis on being an interracial organization had a significant impact on their organizational goals and methods. From the beginning, CORE was an interracial group. The six primary founders of CORE included two African Americans: James Farmer and Joe Guinn, and four whites: George Houser, Bernice Fisher, Homer Jack, and James R. Robinson. Yet the interracial nature of CORE was not circumstantial, it was central to their vision of racial equality. Interracial action and Gandhian nonviolence were, according to Meier and Rudwick, "the twin ideological beliefs underpinning CORE's organizational structure."[13] As their Statement of Purpose clearly explained, "CORE has one method—interracial, non-violent direct action."[14]

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[13] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 9.

[14] CORE, "Statement of Purpose," in Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*.

Indeed, the young activists even chose their organization's name because it emphasized the interracial nature of the group itself. Debate over the group's name centered primarily on the preposition: would they be the Committee *for* Racial Equality, the Committee *on* Racial Equality, or the Committee *of* Racial Equality? Because "racial equality exists," they claimed, *for* was quickly eliminated as an option, as "working *for* it would be erroneous." However, they were also drawn to the fact that *of* or *on* would allow for the acronym CORE, which they liked because it indicated that unlike the NAACP and Urban League, they "were working at the core of the problem" rather than on the "fringes." The ensuing discussion was about what the "o" would stand for. According to James Farmer, the discussion was "lengthy and high-spirited" and "philosophical, not frivolous." Ultimately, the group settled on the Committee *of* Racial Equality, as it reflected the fact that "[w]e were a committee of racially equal people." As Farmer explained, "of…implied that the organization, in its structure, its methods, and its very being, would reflect the objective it sought."[15]

Yet CORE's primary emphasis on interracialism, as opposed to expanding African American civil rights, for example, had a significant impact on how CORE approached notions of race. "One of our motivations," Bernice Fisher explained, "had been the determination that there should be a thoroughly interracial organization…not another Negro group with token membership of whites." CORE challenged the concept of the "Negro problem," a popular phrase used during the 1940s to describe U.S. racism and opposition to it. Rather than a "Negro problem," CORE founders maintained, the issue was actually a "human problem which could be eliminated only through the joint efforts of all believers in the brotherhood of man." As Fisher recalled, "My avowed intention was to fight for the time that race would be a term of importance

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[15] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 18; James Farmer, *Lay Bare thy Heart,* 105.

only to anthropologists." As these statements suggest, early CORE was relatively uninterested in thinking about the specificity of Black experiences in the United States. Instead, they challenged segregation and discrimination purely on the basis of a universal humanness.[16]

In spite of CORE's committed interracial focus, the group's goals and interests generally overlapped with those of Black-led organizations. However, their explicit rejection of Black-centered expressions of freedom also put them at odds with those who might otherwise be their primary allies. For example, interacialism led to an ambivalent response to the most promising mass organization for Black freedom during the 1940s, A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement (MOWM). James Farmer described Randolph as "the most feared and the greatest black leader of the thirties," someone who had been called "the most dangerous Negro in America." During the 1940s, he was still regarded as "the towering civil rights figure of [the] period" and his MOWM was the closest thing to a national organization that challenged racial discrimination, something CORE aspired to become. Sociologist Aldon D. Morris calls the MOWM a primary "forerunner to the modern civil rights movement" because it "demonstrated conclusively that masses of blacks could be organized for collective protest."[17]

In spite of Randolph's prominence and CORE's interest in becoming a national organization, they responded to Randolph and the MOWM with skepticism. In 1943, Randolph had decided to organize a massive campaign against Jim Crow laws, which he wanted to model after Gandhi's nonviolent protests in India. Recognizing CORE's and the FOR's knowledge about Gandhian nonviolence, he consulted with members about the possibility of using Gandhian

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[16] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 10-11.

[17] Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: MacMillan, 1984), *x*. See also: Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Confrontation: Black and White* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 147-61; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 11; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 132,154-55.

techniques in a mass action. Though Bayard Rustin supported Randolph's vision, the fact that it required mass participation led members of CORE to question its feasibility, arguing that participants would require a level of training in Gandhian methods that Randolph was not prepared to undertake. Rustin was convinced otherwise. In February 1943 Rustin celebrated Randolph's investment in the possibility of nonviolent direct action, saying, "A. Philip Randolph spoke in a way that convinced me that he is really concerned to develop an understanding and use of nonviolence by the American Negro."[18]

Though the lack of training was a primary reason for some CORE members' skepticism, they were also deeply concerned about the all-Black character of Randolph's MOWM. Surprisingly, given Rustin's later positions on integration, Rustin was not so concerned. Reporting in 1941, he noted that "Black nationalism is rampant" in the African American community with "a growing feeling that the Negro must solve his own problem."[19] Later, in October 1943, Rustin claimed, "When enough Negroes can be organized into a strong pressure group, they will be able to obtain their rights." He stated further: "If whites were admitted to the MOW, they might control the movement…. They would take the leadership away from young Negroes, who ought to have it. If money were accepted from whites, they would control the thinking of the movement as well….There must be a peculiarly Negro organization to face the peculiarly Negro problems of today."[20]

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[18] Bayard Rustin, "Rustin to A.J. Muste," letter dated Febraury 22, 1943, in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 8.

[19] Bayard Rustin, "Bayard Rustin to the FOR Staff," memorandum, September 12, 1941, in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 6.

[20] Bayard Rustin, lecture, October 17, 1943, quoted in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 9-10.

Though ultimately CORE joined Rustin in supporting Randolph's efforts, they had serious reservations. James Farmer thought the movement "smacks of racial chauvinism," explaining, "The stronger black nationalism becomes in Negro life in America, the farther we are from a real solution to the problem of color….We cannot destroy segregation with a weapon of segregation." The conflict between a Black-centered approach and CORE's interracialism struck both ways. Though CORE leaders often worked closely with A. Philip Randolph throughout the mid-century Black freedom struggle, on at least one occasion Randolph declined to collaborate with CORE on a particular project, claiming that "Negroes…themselves should take the leadership in the fight." In spite of such critiques, CORE insisted on maintaining interracial campaigns.[21]

CORE's critique of the Black MOWM reflected a willingness within early CORE speak out against the "racial chauvinism" of Black nationalism just as they did of white supremacy. Ultimately, they were wary of anything that challenged interracialism. The "Negro voting bloc to us was anathema," Bernice Fisher explained, as it "[built] up of the myth of differences." Fisher, a white woman who was among the most outspoken on this point, even launched arguments against Negro History Week. Responding to a "black cleric who spoke of his pride in the historic heroes of the Negro race," Fisher claimed she had "the equal right to be proud of them as a part of the human race." For Fisher, even the notion of Negro History Week "seemed mere chauvinism…"[22]

Fisher's critical stance on celebrations of Black pride and history and Farmer's critiques of the all-Black MOWM demonstrate the extent to which CORE's steadfast commitment to interracialism positioned them in opposition to explicit expressions of Blackness. In this way,

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[21] A. Philip Randolph, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 21.
[22] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 10-11.

while CORE's interracialism sought to challenge U.S. racism and discrimination, their emphasis on interracial humanism necessarily stood in the way of visions of freedom that placed notions of Black humanity at the center. Thus, while CORE sought to use Gandhian nonviolence as an affront to racial oppression in the United States, their emphasis on interracialism encouraged them to interpret Gandhian philosophy in ways that put primacy on changing how African Americans were treated and perceived more so than on African Americans' own internal experiences. This, combined with their emphasis on themes of moral persuasion and loving the oppressor, helped encourage externally oriented interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence in the Black freedom struggle.

Christianity

For many members of early CORE, the intensity of their commitment to interracialism and Gandhian nonviolence was also connected to their Christianity. Indeed, while Gandhian nonviolence was primarily rooted in Hinduism, Gandhi himself recognized nonviolence reflected in Christianity. He was heavily influenced by the Christian-anarchism of Leo Tolstoy, and said that the New Testament, and particularly the Sermon on the Mount, "went straight to my heart."[23] The link between Gandhian nonviolence and Christianity was very meaningful for many CORE members. As James Farmer explained, "…the Jewish-Christian faith in the universal community" was "at the very foundation of the pacifist philosophy" and part of what "urges that putting an end to racial discrimination become one of our major emphases." Bernice

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[23] Gandhi, in Dennis Dalton, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 37.

Fisher similarly recalled, "I had been caught up with the idea that we should live life now as if the Kingdom of God were at hand…To many of us [nonviolence] was a philosophy of life."[24]

One of the FOR workshops that Bayard Rustin led in 1943 during a speaking tour in California was called "Five Kinds of Nonviolent Direct Action Jesus Used." In it he drew on biblical passages to explain how Jesus of Nazareth used nonviolent direct action tactics, including civil disobedience, noncooperation, mass marches, and "personal nonviolent direct action" ("he drove by drastic actions the exploiters [moneychangers] from the temple").[25]

Christianity had always been a central aspect of the FOR's organizational vision, which James Farmer recognized when he made his initial proposal for his vision of CORE to the FOR National Council. "I put my words in a religious context," he explained, "because this was, after all, the FOR."[26] Though ultimately it was decided that CORE would not be explicitly connected to the FOR, the FOR's intellectual and philosophical influence, as well as their financial and institution support, meant that the Christian-pacifist orientation of the older organization continued to be important in both organizations.

The church played a significant role in the lives of CORE's members. Half of CORE's six founders were divinity students at the University of Chicago, while another, James Farmer, had just received his Bachelor of Divinity from Howard University. The Methodist church, which had a significant influence on the Christian-pacifist activism that fueled the FOR during the 1930s, was particularly influential on CORE as well. Another CORE founder, George

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[24] Farmer and Fisher, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 10.
[25] Bayard Rustin, quoted in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 9.
[26] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 102.

Houser, was the son of a Methodist minister and both he and Farmer "had been prominent in Methodist student circles in the 1930's."[27]

Given the significant influence of Christianity, it is not surprising that their vision of Gandhian nonviolence was also inflected with religiously motivated themes. James Farmer recalled defending his interest in Gandhian nonviolence to his father in the early 1940s in terms of Christianity, arguing: "…if there is nonviolence in Hinduism, so also is there in Christianity. 'Turn the other cheek.' Jesus putting the severed ear back on the head of the soldier. 'He who lives by the sword, by the sword shall perish.' 'Love thine enemy.' The Christians are the lions. And on and on."[28] Like Farmer, CORE applied a lens of Christianity to their interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence. In this vein, they regularly emphasized the value of conversion and moral persuasion, putting particular emphasis on the concept of loving and respecting the oppressor.

Moral Suasion and Loving the Oppressor in CORE's Interpretation of Gandhian Nonviolence

The combination of Christian-pacifism and commitment to interracialism in CORE and the FOR played a significant role in the ways that they translated Gandhian nonviolence to the U.S. context. Interracialism, Christianity, and pacifism not only drew early CORE members to Gandhi, they also influenced *how* the young activists interpreted and implemented Gandhian nonviolent direct action. CORE particularly emphasized two themes in their interpretations of Gandhi's philosophy. First, they emphasized the use of nonviolent direct action as method of conversion and moral suasion. Second, and relatedly, they drew heavily on Gandhi's instruction to approach one's adversary with love and respect.

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[27] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 4-5.
[28] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 80.

The first two aspects of the nonviolent method outlined in CORE's "Action Discipline" reflected these emphases: "the power of active good-will," and "the power of public opinion against a wrong-doer."[29] Active good will symbolized CORE's version of loving and respecting the oppressor, while using the power of public opinion drew on notions of moral suasion. Importantly, CORE's approach was always concerned with how their actions would actually change social relationships in the service of building a more perfect interracial community. According to Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick, these themes "expressed the belief that direct action should always be accompanied by a spirit of good-will toward the discriminator, a frame of mind calculated to change not only his racist behavior, but his attitudes as well."[30]

The specific steps outlined in CORE's process of nonviolent direct action began with attempts to "convert the opponent through negotiations," and then "arouse public opinion [through] agitation." This emphasis on conversion and public persuasion was at the heart of CORE's nonviolent approach. In a newsletter from January 1943 CORE reiterated these key elements of the procedure, reminding its members to "Remember technique!...Gather facts. Negotiate. Rouse public opinion, and then, if absolutely necessary, and only as a last resort, Take Direct Action…"[31] The newsletter reflected CORE's emphasis on negotiation and engaging public sentiment. Further, by emphasizing the use of direct action only as a "last resort", CORE demonstrated their primary concern with externally oriented results. In contrast, though CORE's steps mimicked Gandhi's process of nonviolent direct action, his *satyagraha* recognized direct

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[29] "CORE Action Discipline," Version adopted by the National Convention of the Congress of Racial Equality, June 1945. (A slightly amended version of original discipline drawn up by the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality in 1942).Leaflet, 1945, CORE Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin) in Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 241.

[30] Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 239.

[31] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 13.

action as a valuable end in itself, meant to build strength and internal power in the *satyagrahi*. By de-emphasizing direct action, CORE implicitly framed it as a technique of persuasion, geared at changing the adversary not the actor.

Another primary commitment in CORE was to "seek to love their opponents and refrain from committing violence, no matter what the provocation, even if this meant accepting death."[32] Drawing on their shared investment in interracialism and Christian values, approaching the racist with love, understanding, and respect was essential in CORE's interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence, and it was emphasized repeatedly in their training and literature. CORE's "Statement of Purpose" required that they "develop a spirit of understanding rather than antagonism."[33] This was echoed in the "Action Discipline," which dictated that the CORE member, "…seek at all times to understand the social situation which engendered the prejudiced attitude of the perpetrator of racial injustice." In addition, it asked the member to "…seek to understand, without compromising his principles, the attitude of the person responsible for a policy of racial discrimination by discussing the problem through with him." At all times, a CORE member was to "harbor no malice or hate toward any individual or group of individuals."[34] The "Action Discipline" also called on CORE members to "suffer the anger of any individual or group in the spirit of good-will and creative reconciliation." Explaining, "In

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[32] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 12, 13 [newsletter].

[33] Chicago Committee of Racial Equality, "Statement of Purpose," 1942, Leaflet, James Farmer Papers., in Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 240.

[34] "CORE Action Discipline," in Meier Rudwick, and Broderick eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 241.

suffering such anger, he will submit to assault and never retaliate in kind, either by act or word," which required that he "never use malicious slogans or labels to discredit any opponent."[35]

According to Meier and Rudwick, the conception of Gandhian nonviolence that "set the tone" for CORE in its first decade, "emphasiz[ed] the *reconciling* spirit which was characteristic of FOR." This spirit was based on the belief that "the activist, by taking unmerited suffering upon himself, mobilized public opinion and," in the words of George Houser, exerted a "redemptive influence upon the wrongdoer." Houser, who had a significant influence on CORE as its first executive secretary and primary editor for CORE's newspaper, the *CORE-lator*, stressed that nonviolence should "incarnate the spirit of understanding, of good will, of humility." The "non-violent campaign," he explained, "cannot be considered a total success unless attitudes are changed in the process of changing policies."[36] Houser and Bayard Rustin emphasized this strategy of moral suasion and respectability in a 1948 memorandum to young men who were considering refusing the draft law:

> Your attitude must be one of absolute nonviolence…. Submit willingly and peacefully to arrest out of a sense of duty and never out of fear or embarrassment. Under no circumstance be mean, or curse, or look angry or strike back, even if you are struck. We are depending on the goodwill that we can express to win not only freedom and liberty, but more important, to win over to our side as many people as we can. We want to win the officials (including the police) to the belief that our cause is just. Behave in such a fine, dignified manner that the police officers become ashamed to arrest anyone who behaves so well.[37]

Though the FOR and CORE shared the goal of ending discrimination with many other activist organizations at the time, it is important to recognize how distinct this approach was from that of other groups like the NAACP, for example, who were much more concerned with establishing firm legal barriers to racial discrimination than with the creation of a harmonious interracial

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[35] "CORE Action Discipline," in Meier Rudwick, and Broderick eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 242.

[36] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE,* 20, 29 ["spirit of understanding…humility"].

[37] Bayard Rustin and George Houser, "Rustin and George Houser to Potential Resisters," memorandum, July 7, 1948, in Michael G. Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 113-114.

community. In the NAACP's estimation, the thoughts and feelings of the discriminator were far less significant than the legal limitations imposed on their behavior, while for CORE it was quite the opposite. CORE was rather skeptical of the approach taken by the NAACP and Urban League, calling their programs "ineffectual." As Houser explained, they believed that discrimination "must be challenged directly, without violence or hatred, yet without compromise…" Some of the "purists among the pacifists," James Farmer remembered, even opposed legal action on the grounds that it was violent. Though he personally believed that "nonviolence and legal action must be twin weapons," others in CORE and the FOR opposed legalism on the grounds that "it did not seek to be loving" and "relied on police action for its enforcement," which, they argued, was "based ultimately on violence." As Farmer suggests, though the implied presence of violence in legal approaches was part of their opposition, CORE activists were more likely to eschew legalism because it had little direct impact on the hearts and minds of the community and thus, they reasoned, was ultimately doing little to truly eliminate racism and discrimination from the culture. Instead, they believed that nonviolent direct action, not legal action, was the best way to impact the community and catalyze change.[38]

Negotiation and Nonviolent Direct Action

While CORE's emphasis on themes of reconciliation and changing the attitudes of their adversaries reflected their emphasis on interracialism and Christianity, it was at times at odds with their commitment to direct action. As the 1943 newsletter implied, CORE chapters often found themselves stuck at the point of negotiation, unwilling to move further in Gandhi's steps of nonviolent direct action. In part this was because of CORE members general "affinity for

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[38] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE,* 6 [Houser quote], 10; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 98-99.

intellectually oriented activities such as investigation and discussion," which Meier and Rudwick suggest often came "at the expense of actions in the streets." Thus because CORE members were often "more concerned with the philosophical emphasis upon loving and converting the enemy" and "upon reconciling whites and blacks" they were less focused on "the employment of nonviolent and direct action such as picketing and sitting-in." At CORE's convention in 1944, Bernice Fisher complained that CORE was attracting individuals who "are more interested in being nonviolent than in hitting the race question," who "misinterpret the technique in terms of 'education,'" and who were more interested "in converting the exploiter…than in ending the exploitation." These concerns were apparent throughout CORE's first four years, where Meier and Rudwick explain, "only half the chapters attempted to move beyond negotiation," and projects often "peter[ed] out" when "CORE locals failed to follow through with more militant tactics." Though occasionally discussion and negotiation with discriminators had an impact on racist practices, more often this was not the case. Because CORE activists were equally committed to "convert[ing] the discriminator" as they were to "end[ing] discrimination," Meier and Rudwick describe CORE campaigns between 1947 and 1954 as "tedious, time-consuming, and protracted."[39]

James Farmer's reflection on a 1942 sit-in at Jack Sprat, a south side Chicago coffee shop, illustrates the limits of CORE's overemphasis on negotiation. This action, Farmer estimates, might have been "the first civil rights sit-in" of the Black freedom movement. Farmer describes a particularly illustrative encounter with a white store manager during the initial "negotiation" phase of the 1942 sit-in. This manager, Farmer remembered, "was somewhat more civil" than the others they had encountered. She politely "explained that they refused service to

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[39] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 25, 29, 49.

Negroes only because they feared the loss of white patrons." For the young activists, this explanation was the foot in the door they needed. In response, they attempted to persuade their case and prove to this woman that such fears were unwarranted. They launched into a list of logical arguments about how serving Black patrons would not negatively impact white business.[40]

"Our team expressed the conviction that they would not lose money," Farmer recalled. "That close to the university, they assured her, most of her customers would approve a change of policy, and those who dissented would easily be offset by the new patrons a change would bring." Perhaps not surprisingly, the manager was not persuaded. In response, Farmer remembered, CORE negotiators offered another option. They suggested that the manager could poll her customers or, they offered, she could let CORE do so, to see what the customers' views really were. Yet after a second refusal from the manager, the CORE negotiators kept going, next proposing that perhaps "a third party, preferably a bookkeeper or CPA, [could] check her books after a month of serving all people, to determine whether Jack Spratt had lost income." Though negotiations were clearly producing little movement, the CORE representatives kept at it. In their final proposal, the negotiators pledged that if it after a trial period it was shown that the coffee shop had indeed lost money, they would "guarantee in writing, if necessary, [that they would] make up the deficit for that month and not return again." Though it seems difficult to imagine that CORE negotiators could have continued after this proposal, it was not them but the manager who finally ended their conversation by walking away.[41]

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[40] James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* in Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 243-246.
[41] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 105-106.

Farmer recalled his personal sense of great relief after hearing from the representatives that the manager had ended negotiations. It "sounded like an unwise proposition to me," he remembered, as "it seemed to say that if racism is good business, we will allow it to continue."[42] Though ultimately the early CORE activists did sit-in at Jack Sprat, reflecting on this encounter in 1965, Farmer expressed wonder at their initial "patience and good faith" throughout the whole process. Not only would a group no longer wait through a month of negotiation before turning to direct action, he explained, but further, their attempts to logically persuade the manager expressed "considerably more sympathy with her point of view than a similar group would today." Significantly, rather than celebrate this aspect of early CORE's approach, Farmer commented that by 1965, "we had grown too proud for that." Instead, he suggested, he and the other young activists had been "childishly literal minded." Echoing the concerns raised by Bernice Fisher in 1944, he elaborated:

> We believed that people meant exactly what they said to us and heard exactly what we said to them. We regarded the sit in as the successful culmination of a long campaign to reach the heart of the restaurant owner with the truth. What we took to be his conversion was as important to us as the fact that the restaurant had indeed been desegregated.[43]

In this way, CORE activists in 1942 expressed considerable faith in their own capacity to change the hearts of their white opponents, and further, their faith in the capacity of whites to see and do differently. This faith led many early CORE activists to prioritize their impact on white attitudes over tangible results in the lives of Black people. Though individuals within early CORE had slightly different emphases in their own interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence, their overwhelming purpose, which was reflected clearly in CORE's literature, was to use Gandhi's framework of nonviolent direct action as a means of influencing change in others.

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[42] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 106.

[43] James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* in Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick, eds. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 243-246.

CORE emphasized the power of moral suasion and the value of loving the oppressor in the service of changing not only behaviors, but also attitudes of their adversaries, in the hopes of reconciling with them. Reflecting the interracial emphasis of their organization, CORE believed the best way to eliminate racial discrimination was by expanding their community of racial equality to the broader public or, as a younger James Farmer put it, to "radiate its equality in wider and wider circles until it encompassed the whole nation."[44]

Loving the oppressor in CORE and Gandhi

While CORE's emphasis on loving and redeeming the oppressor derived from Gandhian *satyagraha,* their purpose in cultivating such love was primarily for its impact on the adversary: to influence, persuade, and ultimately convert him to take part in their vision of a peaceful and harmonious interracial community. For Gandhi, this was very different. Instead, Gandhi's emphasis was not on how loving or respecting the adversary would impact that adversary, or even how it would impact their tangible goals in the struggle. While Gandhi did advocate the use of nonviolent direct action as a political strategy, the outcome of such actions was secondary. Instead, his primary concern was how developing love for the adversary would influence the *satyagrahi* herself, how she and her community would benefit from growing a sense of love within.

Gandhi's distinction between *satyagraha* and *duragraha* is illustrative here. While having "understanding, openness, and respect for the adversary" are among the core values of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, their purpose is for the *satyagrahi* to not "harbor enmity and anger within." Thus, while "avoid[ing] physical violence" in an act of passive resistance may be a

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[44] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE,* 18; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 105.

useful expression of "the power of bias," or *duragraha*, it does not embody the soul force of truth and love at the heart of *satyagraha*. In this way, Gandhi's interest in removing hate from the heart of the actor takes primacy over the impact that such actions may or may not have. This distinction seems subtle, but in fact, it is the difference between recognizing nonviolent direct action as a strategy for pressuring change in others rather than a way to cultivate personal power, fearlessness, and strength inside oneself. In this way, though CORE often used the term *satyagraha,* their primary emphasis of nonviolent direct action as a form of moral suasion, influence, and bias was perhaps more accurately an expression of Gandhian *duragraha*.[45]

This distinction illustrates that while the pairing of moral suasion and loving the oppressor derived from Gandhi's framework of nonviolent direct action, CORE's interpretations of these themes failed to effectively incorporate Gandhi's primary emphasis on internal transformation. Instead, CORE's version of Gandhian nonviolence demonstrated a primary investment in affecting the adversary rather than the actor herself. This outward rather than inward focus had a significant impact on how Gandhian nonviolence came to function during the civil rights movement. Recognizing these differences between an internally oriented and externally oriented interpretation of loving the adversary is key for understanding the framework of Gandhian nonviolence in the United States.

Nonviolence influences the Civil rights movement

Though the FOR continued to have a broader organizational agenda than just racial justice, they played a significant role in events such as the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, in which a group of Black and white activists tested the federal ruling against segregated facilities

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[45] Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 10.

in interstate travel. Foreshadowing CORE's Freedom Rides of 1961, the Journey of Reconciliation was among the most recognized national actions to oppose racial discrimination during the 1940s. At the same time, though CORE chapters spread from Chicago to various cities throughout northern United States including St. Louis, Oakland, New York City, and Baltimore, the organization went through a period of decline by the 1950s. Their particularly northern focus and organizational limits, like emphasizing negotiation over action, kept the organization relatively limited.

Though both CORE and the FOR remained dedicated to using Gandhian nonviolent direct action to combat racial injustice throughout the 1940s and 1950s, they were not responsible for the mass mobilization that sparked the beginning of the civil rights movement in most mainstream historical narratives. Instead, the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, mobilized around a mass campaign of nonviolent direct action, marked the starting point of the mass grassroots action of the civil rights movement and launched Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence as the movement's symbol of Gandhian nonviolence.

Though Gandhian nonviolence became a central strategic framework for the civil rights movement, it is probably more accurate to say that the Montgomery bus boycott initially derived from the longer traditions of boycotts and other protest activity in African American communities. Indeed, boycott leaders did not initially tie the protest explicitly to a philosophy of Gandhian nonviolence. However, King began making reference to Gandhi in his sermons and speeches within the first few months.[46]

That boycott leaders in Montgomery would draw connections to Gandhi is not surprising. His campaign for Indian independence had been covered in the Black press since the 1920s and

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[46] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 32.

it was clear to most that his movement was well-aligned with the struggle against white supremacy in the U.S. Initial connections between the bus boycott and Gandhian philosophy were also certainly influenced by King, who had just received his doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University and had been exposed to Gandhi's philosophy as a student.[47]

However, though Montgomery movement leaders in 1955 were certainly aware of Gandhian nonviolence, and its potential value in their campaign, it was not until Glenn E. Smiley and Bayard Rustin went to Montgomery in February 1956 that an explicitly Gandhian framework took root in the movement. According to Religious scholar and FOR member Walter Wink, "King himself, at the onset of the Montgomery bus boycott, had called on FOR to send someone who knew about Gandhian nonviolence firsthand."[48]

Glenn E. Smiley and Bayard Rustin had both been longtime staff members at the FOR, though Rustin had recently taken a position with the War Resisters League (WRL), another pacifist organization with ties to the FOR. Rustin arrived in Montgomery prior to Smiley, though he had been instructed to maintain a low profile. It had become important for the Montgomery movement to not appear to be influenced by outside organizations, and many believed Rustin's particular positionality could exacerbate those concerns. Rustin, who was a FOR staff member at the time of CORE's founding in 1942, had a long history with the Christian pacifists and was instrumental in both the founding of CORE and the FOR's Journey of Reconciliation in 1947. However, Rustin had also been a member of the Young Communist League for a brief time in his youth and further, had served time in prison for draft resistance. Most recently in January

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[47] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*. For an example of early Black press coverage see the Editorial, "Gandhi of India Stirs White Races: U.S. Sees Grave Danger in Success Against British Misrule*," Chicago Defender*, March 11, 1922, 14.

[48] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 66-70; Walter Wink, "Preface," in Walter Wink, ed., *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), xiii.

1953, he had been arrested in Pasadena, California and sentenced to sixty days in jail on charges of "lewd vagrancy" after police approached Rustin and two other men having a sexual encounter in a parked car. Following this arrest, Rustin submitted his resignation and was terminated from the FOR. In the context of 1950s cold war America, Rustin had become a potentially dangerous associate for a developing protest movement, particularly one built around claims to respectability and legitimacy. "Bear in mind," Rustin wrote to his friends in the WRL shortly after he arrived in Montgomery, "there must be not talk of me being here and reports should be made confidential in terms of no one here knowing that I am so closely tied in."[49] Less than a week after Rustin arrived, the FOR sent Smiley to join him. Though Smiley was under explicit instruction not to associate himself with Rustin or draw attention to the presence of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, both Smiley and Rustin played important roles in introducing a more robust Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence to King, and by extension, the Montgomery movement.[50]

Smiley recalled being eager in his first meeting with King, showing up with a pile of books on nonviolence. "I'm assuming that you're very familiar and have been greatly influenced by Gandhi," he said. In spite of King's previous exposure to Gandhi, he admitted to Smiley that he was not. Though he admired Gandhi, King said, "I will have to truthfully say…that I know very little about the man." Yet he was interested in learning more.[51] In the following weeks, Rustin and Smiley began King's serious political education about the contours of Gandhian nonviolence and how the FOR and CORE had been using it in their campaigns since the 1940s. Though they both admitted he had much to learn, they were also excited about King's potential.

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[49] Long, *I Must Resist*, 169.
[50] David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 68; Long, *I Must Resist*, 149-165.
[51] Glenn E. Smiley, quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 68.

Smiley remembered, "He didn't even use the word [nonviolence] at first...he used 'passive resistance' almost entirely." But in spite of this, Rustin claimed, King was "developing a decidedly Gandhi-like view."[52]

The connection that Rustin developed with King in particular during his time in Montgomery left a significant impression on the both of them. As Smiley reported to the FOR shortly after his arrival, "Bayard has had a very good influence on King, wrote the much quoted speech last week, and was in on all the strategy." CORE co-founder Homer Jack concurred, reporting that Rustin "seemed especially effective in counseling with the leaders of protest during the crucial 2 weeks after the mass arrests for the boycott. His contribution to interpreting the Gandhian approach to the leadership cannot be overestimated."[53]

Soon, Rustin was helping King with the business of being the face of a social movement organization. In this, Rustin excelled. Throughout the remainder of the decade, Rustin worked as one of King's primary strategic advisors, helping to strategize the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He ghostwrote King's first published article, which appeared in the April 1956 issue of *Liberation*, as well as many other speeches and publications thereafter. He and Stanley D. Levison, a white attorney active with Rustin in "In Friendship," became King's primary editing team. They heavily edited King's first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*.[54]

King drew on his training as a pastor and his relationship to the Christian church to root his expression of nonviolent philosophy in religion, but it was Rustin's, as well as Smiley's,

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[52] Glenn E. Smiley and Bayard Rustin, quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 72.
[53] Glenn E. Smiley and Homer Jack, quoted in Long, *I Must Resist*, 174-5.
[54] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 73-111. "In Friendship" was a New York activist group that had been raising funds for southern civil rights work since 1956, in addition to Levison and Rustin, Ella Baker was also a member who worked closely with King before the formation of SCLC, shortly after which she became its Executive Secretary.

strategic interpretation of Gandhian nonviolence as a movement framework that played heavily into how King came to use and make sense of nonviolence as a part of his campaign for African American civil rights. The combination of King's Christianity with the Christian-pacifist influence from the FOR, Gandhian nonviolence came to be used in the civil rights movement as as a philosophical and moral justification for a primarily strategic goal. The civil rights movement used morality claims in connection with direct action protest but like in CORE, the emphasis was most often externally oriented, as a means of moral suasion rather than internal transformation. In a memo from Rustin to King, sent December 23, 1956, Rustin highlighted some of the unique strengths of the Montgomery movement, emphasizing that "the actions of the people won the respect of their enemy" and gave "the closed mind of the white Southerner an airing it has never before had." Though he recognized that African American self-respect was one of the gains of the movement, he explained that it was also "the respect of white people who, though they retain basic prejudice, have lost something in the course of this year that begins their long struggle to genuine understanding. In short," Rustin continued, "Montgomery has contributed to the mental health and growth of the white man's mind, and thus to the entire nation."[55]

Rustin's emphasis reflected the growing notion that doing what was morally right was primarily valuable as a means of influence and persuasion in the civil rights movement and often only secondarily as an act of self and community empowerment. Though King's sermons and speeches certainly connected the concept of nonviolence to a sense of internal power or transformation, he put primacy on using morality as a movement strategy. Though he rarely

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[55] Bayard Rustin, Memo to Martin Luther King, Jr., December 23, 1956 in Long, *I Must Resist*, 181-182.

credited Rustin and Smiley's influence publicly, King's strategic framework for Gandhian

nonviolence reflected their guidance. King explained on a news broadcast in 1967:

> I became convinced that the Gandhian philosophy and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance, could serve as the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity. Now I must admit that when I first became inspired by this method and became convinced that it was the most potent weapon available to the negro in struggle in America and to oppressed people generally, I had no particular plan of action. In other words, I was more or less intellectually committed to it. But I did not at that time conceive of the moment when I would start a movement where this method would be the guiding principle and the guiding technique….My mind went back, consciously or unconsciously, to the Gandhian technique or the Gandhian principle because I knew that this was a method constantly used by Gandhian struggle in India, and I knew that this was a kind of thing that could guide us through this struggle and bring about an ultimate victory if we adhered vigorously to nonviolent resistance.[56]

While activists trained in Gandhian nonviolence in the tradition of CORE and the FOR

had influence on the way first King and then other leaders used Gandhian philosophy in the civil

rights movement, they also presaged another important development that framed the civil rights

movement, namely the relationship to liberal allies. CORE reflected the growing awareness of

liberals as significant allies for the growth of the movement in 1953, when CORE was at a

serious organizational low point.

Internal divisions had emerged within the organization, particularly in relation to

heightened Cold War anticommunism. Though CORE had already adopted an explicit statement

forbidding the membership of communists in the organization, a few members began to

challenge this view. They argued that CORE was in a unique position to counter the "hysterical

wave of McCarthyism" that was growing in the nation. Because of CORE's image as a direct

action protest group, these members reasoned, CORE's "youthfulness and flexibility and its lack

of 'respectability'" actually gave the organization room to launch this critique. However, most in

the organization felt differently. Concerned about CORE's decline over the past years, CORE

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[56] "H. Rap Brown and the Rise of Violence in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement," *Newsmagazine*, CBC, broadcast July 31, 1967. CBC Digital Archives.

leaders argued that rather than set themselves apart based on their perceived lack of respectability, the organization needed to do the opposite: make strides to "cultivate greater respectability and thereby gain greater acceptance." Though he was one of CORE's pacifist founders, James R. Robinson argued that CORE needed to lose its "cult image" and "appeal to the non-radical liberal…" In the 1950s, he claimed, CORE should try to "pitch itself through liberals to liberals rather than as once, through pacifists to pacifists and a few liberals." Not surprisingly, given the nature of the organization at the time, Robinson's position won out, and over the course of the decade, CORE worked to specifically to amass liberal supporters.[57]

Though this chapter has argued that CORE emphasized strategic and externally oriented aspects of nonviolent direct action in its interpretations of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, its founding members were nonetheless fully commitment to nonviolence as a philosophy and way of life. However, even this emphasis was subject to change in the face of CORE's attempts to appeal to a more mainstream base in the 1950s. In spite of continued critiques from a small minority in the group that CORE was developing an "overconcern with 'respectability,'" CORE's annual convention in 1953 voted to remove part of their "Action Discipline" statement that said, "the nonviolent method assumes the possibility of creating a world in which nonviolence will be used to a maximum degree." Members of the New York chapter of CORE, who proposed the change, wanted to demonstrate that their commitment to nonviolence was not a "total philosophy." Instead, they proposed an alternative, stating simply that nonviolent direct action "is a technique for developing a racially-integrated society in America."[58]

Given these shifts in CORE's emphasis by 1953, it makes more sense why it was members of the FOR, rather than CORE, who influenced King's interpretations of Gandhian

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[57] Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 66-67.
[58] Ibid.*,* 67-68.

nonviolence in 1956. Though FOR activists were not exclusively committed to applying Gandhian nonviolence to racial discrimination in the United States in the way that CORE was, the FOR had developed a significant commitment to combatting racism over the course of its organizational life. Bayard Rustin in particular remained active in the FOR and simultaneously became a primary strategist for the civil rights movement, including the planning of the 1963 March on Washington. Yet because the FOR remained tied more explicitly to its Christian-pacifist origins, their emphasis on Gandhian nonviolence as a philosophy remained in tact throughout the 1950s. As such, while their emphasis remained much more externally oriented than Gandhi's, the FOR was able to offer a framework of nonviolent direct action that bridged morality, legitimacy, direct action, and spirituality in a way that was particularly valuable in the context of the emerging civil rights liberal framework of the civil rights movement.

As the civil rights movement developed around a dialectic of increasing opportunity for liberal support and mainstream visibility on one side, and the growing strength of the grassroots nonviolent direct action movement on the other, the FOR and CORE's particular interpretation of Gandhian nonviolent direct action translated well. This framework for nonviolence fit well with the combination of mass action and mainstream legitimacy that the civil rights movement occupied. Further, Gandhi, as a simultaneous spiritual and political leader, was a perfect model for how to blend religion and politics in the civil rights movement. Thus, CORE and the FOR's interpretation of Gandhi offered a fitting framework for how nonviolence would function in the civil rights movement, justifying the use of direct action through morality.

Conclusion

The ways that we have understood nonviolence during the civil rights movement have derived from particular interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence that were translated into the U.S. context during the mid-twentieth century. The concerted commitment to nonviolent direct action in the Black freedom struggle started with CORE and the FOR during the 1940s. As an interracial and religiously rooted group that was deeply committed to pacifism, CORE translated Gandhian nonviolence to the context of the civil rights movement in particular ways that emphasized loving and redeeming the oppressor and using direct action as a form of moral persuasion. Though these themes manifested differently in Gandhi's philosophy, CORE's interpretations helped to make these themes central in the civil rights movement.

This chapter argues that those particular interpretations of Gandhian nonviolence had a significant impact on the way nonviolence functioned in the civil rights movement. While Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy put primacy on internal transformation, the predominant emphasis of nonviolence in the civil rights movement was external and primarily strategic. Often, these understandings were geared toward CORE-inspired notions of loving and changing the hearts and minds of white people. Because of their appeal to potential white allies, these themes were very conducive to cultivating and tending to the civil rights liberal alliance. As a result, direct action was less likely to be understood as a tool for transforming consciousness within the Black community than it was for the impact it had on white onlookers and racist oppressors. In this way, nonviolence became a way to publicly persuade and shame, rather than internally build and strengthen.

The particularities surrounding the externally-oriented use of nonviolent direct action puts the civil rights movement in relief against a longer trajectory of Black freedom struggle in the United States. Not only does this suggest ways that the civil rights movement was able to

gain legitimacy in the political context of the mid-twentieth century, it also suggests that the distinction between internally- and externally-oriented philosophies of social action are highly relevant for understanding different moments and movements within the Black freedom struggle.

CHAPTER THREE:
LIBERALISM AND BLACK HUMANITY IN SNCC's "GOLDEN ERA"

Southern student protesters formalized into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960 in the midst of the wave of student sit-ins that spread across the South. Rather than accept the offer to become a student wing of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s SCLC, the students instead chose to maintain their autonomy as a student-run organization. Their choice was guided by the direction of the then SCLC Executive Secretary, Ella J. Baker, who was one of the most significant organizers in the 20th century Black freedom struggle and also the students' most influential advisor and teacher.

Over the next year and half, SNCC students' political education expanded significantly. They maintained their commitment to nonviolent direct action as a way to challenge segregation in public accommodations, and gained national attention when they took over the Freedom Rides that had been initiated by CORE in 1961. They began to develop an organizational reputation as a group of young people willing to put themselves on the line for what they believed and this contributed to their growing sense of their own power as political actors, as well as their developing reputation as formidable force in the civil rights movement.

In 1961, SNCC transitioned away from being a coordinating body of local campus protest groups and moved into the local community-organizing model that would come to characterize SNCC thereafter. As historian Charles Payne explained, "SNCC initiated the mass-based, disruptive political style we associate with the sixties, and it provided philosophical and organizational models and hands-on training for people who would become leaders in the student

power movement, the anti-war movement, and the feminist movement."[1] Rather than student volunteers, SNCC became a staff of full-time workers committed to developing local organizations that encouraged Black political participation and challenged racism and discrimination throughout the South. In this regard, Ella Baker's influence was again fundamental. Baker's long organizing history included work as a community organizer in New York City during the Depression, playing a leading role in the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, which facilitated the development of black economic cooperatives throughout the nation. She also worked with the Adult Education Program in Harlem. During the 1940s Baker became a field secretary for the NAACP and the first Executive director of SCLC in the final years of the 1950s. Throughout her work Baker maintained an approach to organizing that was distinct from most civil rights leaders at the time. According to her biographer, Barbara Ransby, Baker was always the "outsider within." She constantly "criticized unchecked egos, objected to undemocratic structures, protested unilateral decision making, condemned elitism, and refused to nod in loyal deference to everything 'the leader' had to say." She encouraged this approach within SNCC, arguing for the need to develop "people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people." This, Baker called "group centered leadership."[2]

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[1] Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 100.

[2] Quotes from Baker in Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 20; On Baker: see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), quote from p. 4; also Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: Wiley, 1998); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 77-102; Carson, *In Struggle*, 19-20; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 40-41.

Charles Payne includes Baker along with Myles Horton and Septima Clark in a group of southern organizers who re-imagined how power and leadership functioned in community organizing. Septima Clark is most remembered for developing Citizenship Schools in conjunction with Highlander Folk School, which Myles Horton co-founded during the Depression. Highlander was first conceived of as a site for developing individual and community self-determination among poor people in Appalachia. In the 1940s it expanded to include education for labor organizers, and by the 1950s Highlander had become a training center for people involved in the civil rights movement. Because of its central role in developing and connecting organizers together, sociologist Aldon D. Morris has called Highlander a movement halfway house.[3] As Payne explained it, "…people like Septima Clark and Ella Baker and Myles Horton tested[…]the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives." Each of them "espoused a non-bureaucratic style of work," and approached local communities with "sensitiv[ity] to [their] social structure," and "appreciat[ion] of the[ir] culture." Less concerned with "whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective," he explained, Baker, Horton, and Clark were more interested in "whether the people in [the community] came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives."[4] Though Baker had the most direct influence on SNCC, Payne contends that "the distinctive style of work SNCC would carry into the hard-core South drew directly and indirectly from the congealed experience of people like Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles

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[3] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 68-77, 70; Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: MacMillan, 1984), 139-140.

[4] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 68.

Horton, experience acquired in exactly the kinds of communities the SNCC kids would work in."[5]

Baker introduced the students to another kind of civil rights activity rooted in many of the same ideas that had already been present in the students' direct action protests. For many student sit-in participants, particularly those most versed in the philosophical elements of nonviolent direct action, they saw their sit-ins as a means to not only change their perception of themselves but also their relationships with other people. As SNCC's Jane Stembridge explained: "…it all boils down to human relationships. It has nothing to do finally with governments. It is the question of whether we…whether *I* shall go on living in isolation or whether there shall be a we. The student movement is not a cause…it is a collision between this one person and that one person. It is a *I am going to sit beside you*…Love alone is radical. Political statements are not; programs are not; even going to jail is not…"[6] In the same way, Baker's organizing style was rooted in the concept of relationship building. Yet unlike the students' previous direct action orientation, Baker's organizing style took the concept of relationship building and brought it more explicitly to the level of the community. Through the influence of Baker, Horton, and Clark, SNCC transitioned from an organization defined by their use of nonviolent direct action into a group of local community organizers.

SNCC's organizational transition from student protest group to a locally oriented community organizing framework is often celebrated as the dawn of a "golden era" in SNCC's organizational history, bookended by SNCC's first entrée into McComb, Mississippi in 1961 and

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[5] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedo*m, 101. See also Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and Septima Poinsette Clark and Cynthia Stokes Brown (ed.), *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement, A First Person Narrative* (1990).

[6] Jane Stembridge, quoted in Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 7.

the beginning of SNCC's organizational decline, which is often located at the end of 1964. This period is celebrated for the bravery and commitment of the overall-clad student activists who faced the horrors of white supremacy while registering voters, organizing resistance to southern segregation, and helping to establish local community organizations in the rural counties and small towns of the Deep South. Often, this high point in SNCC is tied directly to their use of egalitarian rather than authoritarian internal practices, community based decision-making, de-centralized organizational structure, and participatory and consensus-oriented processes, all geared toward empowering local people. As such, it is counterposed to a period of organizational collapse within SNCC, where, against a backdrop of frustration and disillusion, calls for centralized power and authoritarian hierarchy combined with a rejection of SNCC's longstanding commitment to interracialism, resulting in a turn away from the celebrated local community organizing focus and toward a nationally-directed, rhetorical campaign associated with Black Power. In so doing, most of the definitive historical narratives on SNCC claim that they abandoned their most important commitments and ushered in their own eventual demise.

Though variations on this narrative exist, SNCC's history is most often a story of declension, mapping the transition from civil rights to Black Power in our larger understandings of the Black freedom struggle. A key limit in such declension narratives has been an overemphasis on internal explanations for changes within SNCC and, concomitantly, relatively minimal critical engagement with the various forms of state-sponsored repression that were directed at SNCC throughout its organizational life and heightened substantially in the final years of the sixties. Historian Clayborne Carson, who has attended to questions of state repression more than other declension-oriented scholars, still demonstrates this limit when he concludes: "Although police harassment and covert repression exacerbated division among black

militants, SNCC hastened its own decline by losing touch with its roots in the deep South."

Though some scholars have challenged this internal and programmatic declension narrative, the

story of SNCC's "golden era" remains largely uncomplicated. While recognizing the need for

more scholarly engagement with the external repression of SNCC, this chapter seeks to examine

the earlier period in SNCC's organizational trajectory and offer an alternative reading.[7]

There are good reasons to celebrate SNCC's community organizing work in the first half

of the 1960s. SNCC activists' willingness to put their bodies on the line, for example, helped

facilitate an essential political education within SNCC about political and social power

relationships between self and community, ally and actor, as well as local and national struggle.

However, I contend that the most promising aspects of this period remain obscured. Specifically,

what goes under-acknowledged are the ways that SNCC's organizational transition to a local

community organizing framework opened space for a set of relationships, practices, and values

within SNCC that encouraged a new level of Black-centered organizing and consciousness to

develop in the interactions between and among members of local African American communities

and Black SNCC workers in the Deep South. Previously, scholars have recognized and

acknowledged these developments within SNCC's history. However, in their analyses SNCC's

efforts are most often grouped into the larger heroic picture of SNCC's pre-1965 on-the-ground

work in order to facilitate declensionist narratives.

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[7] Carson, *In Struggle*, 300. Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For a recent example of scholarship that challenges the programmatic declension narrative see: Hasan Kwame Jeffries examination of SNCC's role in the formation of Alabama's Lowndes County Freedom Organization—LCFO— in 1965: Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). See also, Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

This chapter claims that the existence of Black-centered organizing and the development of Black consciousness within SNCC's Deep South projects before 1965 signals a longer trajectory of themes that were made more explicit within SNCC after 1965, particularly through their embrace of the Black Power as an organizational slogan in 1966. Rather than a testament to SNCC's community organizing heyday, I argue that these themes developed *in spite of* a set of liberal organizational trends within SNCC that worked against and limited the pursuit of Black freedom during SNCC's "golden era". As SNCC workers sought to empower local people and democratize processes of community engagement, hierarchies of race, class, education status, region, and gender operated within SNCC's organizing tradition, often working in opposition to their on-the-ground goals.

This chapter suggests developing an alternative emphasis for understanding themes of declension in SNCC's organizational trajectory. SNCC's transition away from being a mainstream civil rights organization at the end of the 1960s was not a product of political radicalism, the authoritarian centralization of power, or a turn away from SNCC's original investments in on-the-ground organizing, nonviolence, or interracialism. Instead, a primary factor in SNCC's decline was their longstanding investment in liberalism. Deeper analysis of this formulation during SNCC's post-1965 period is needed to fully develop this argument. For now, two examples suggest its validity. In an August 1970 letter, New York SNCC leader Muhammad Hunt told staff that in their "process of rebuilding the organization" they needed to "destroy ALL vestiges of certain bourgeois ideas, attitudes and behavior patterns[…]within the organization." Hunt's concerns echoed those of longtime SNCC staffer James Forman, who reflected on the continued limitations posed by internalized liberalism within SNCC between 1964 and 1966. "[A]n organization that is seeking revolution," he explained, "[…]cannot afford the fear of

power. It cannot afford weak or vacillating leadership; it cannot afford liberalistic forms of self-assertion." This chapter examines the concept of internalized liberalism within SNCC as a prelude to broader examinations of liberalism in relation to SNCC's organizational development and decline throughout the 1960s. In this context, internalized liberalism refers to the practices and approaches that SNCC activists used in their local organizing work, often unintentionally, that recreated power dynamics similar to the ones they critiqued on a broader, national scale among white liberal allies. This chapter argues that the limits of liberalism were already clear during the period that declension narratives celebrate as SNCC's "golden era".[8]

This chapter contends that while SNCC pushed back against the liberal framework of the civil rights movement in its early attempts to place Black humanity at the center of the struggle, those attempts were simultaneously undermined and limited, not only by their continued organizational commitment to the overarching liberal framework of the civil rights movement, but also by the ways in which liberalism was internalized and functioned on the ground, even during the height of SNCC's organizational strength in the first part of the decade.

Black-centered Organizing in SNCC

Through the new organizational orientation that emerged in 1961, SNCC transitioned toward community organizing rather than their previous student protest framework. In this process SNCC students turned into community activists and the relationships they built facilitated an important expansion of political consciousness among Black SNCC workers and the local communities in which they worked. Between 1961 and 1963, SNCC established local

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[8] Muhammad Hunt to SNCC staff, August 13, 1970, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 298. Original letter cited from Special Agent in Charge (SAC), New York to Director, FBI, "SNCC," May 10, 1971, p. 47; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 413.

community organizing projects in Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Maryland.[9] Through their encounters with local people and in the local communities of the Deep South, including the daily terror and threats of violence from local whites, SNCC activists' political education grew. As they settled further into their roles as community organizers, a new set of values emerged among SNCC workers on the ground. The new organizer orientation allowed SNCC to develop a set of practices and values that contributed to the students' sense of power and uniqueness. This new organizing emphasis focused on expanding the personal and community power of local people by building relationships and using forms of participatory democracy to expand local people's control over the structures that shaped their lives. In the process, SNCC helped to increase a sense of shared political consciousness and identity as Black people, not only within the local community, but also among Black SNCC workers.

Part of SNCC's organizational philosophy was to prioritize local decision-making so that local people decided and enacted their own goals and processes. This was a key part of what kept internal transformation a continued aspect of their local organizing approach: everyone's sense of pride in self and community power expanded when they took control of the decisions and directions of the movement. SNCC increasingly saw their emphasis on local decision-making as a central part of their politics. It not only encouraged community empowerment but it also set them apart from the mainstream civil rights establishment, a value that was becoming increasingly significant for SNCC activists. At a SNCC meeting in March 1962, SNCC staffer Charles Jones claimed that SNCC was unique because they sought to "form community movements, not organizations." Julian Bond agreed. What set SNCC apart was that when their

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[9] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 316n2.

organizers left a local area they left behind "a community movement with local leadership, not a new branch of SNCC." A SNCC promotional pamphlet from August 1963 claimed, "SNCC workers have organized and guided local protest movements which are never identified as SNCC projects. This is part of its program of developing, building, and strengthening indigenous leadership."[10]

For SNCC workers it was important to let local people direct the struggle. A SNCC volunteer in Shaw, Mississippi explained her project's decision to picket a local merchant in terms of local direction. "[T]he people, residents of Shaw, decided," she said. "This is important, because staff people don't make this kind of decisions." She further used this to set SNCC apart from other civil rights groups. "This is where we differ from M.L. King and his officers," she explained. "In their work the staff people make the decisions, rather than letting the people in the town where they're working decide what they want to do, when and how."[11] This, Albany, Georgia's project director Charles Sherrod recalled, was because they "were always people conscious," something he says was heavily influenced by Ella Baker.[12]

Ella Baker's influence on SNCC's organizing model also put primacy on building relationships as the key to organizing. This became a central drive in SNCC's philosophy, as Sherrod said, "getting together…was our main strategy; people doing things together, people helping people." He explained further:

> If you're hungry, and need a place to stay, you're thrown out of your house, then you can come to my house, and I'll feed you. That's the kind of conception we had in the movement. That's the kind of conception we promoted at mass meetings. We took names of people who were willing to help, willing to feed. We had any number of places we could go—to take people to, if something happened. They said this

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[10] Charles Jones and Julian Bond, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle,* 62; "SNCC," Organizing Brochure, August 1963, p. 4.

[11] Mary Sue Gellaty, "Mary Sue Gellaty to Mrs. Franz," (April 6, 1965), COFO-Shaw Papers, State Historical Society Wisconsin (SHSW).

[12] Charles Sherrod, Columbia Oral History Archives interview, p. 46.

in mass meetings. That's a part of organizing: getting a list of this, and list of that, and a list of the other. That's organizing. We had that down pat.

Building relationships was about "a kind of caring" and mutual support: "He's learning from me; I'm learning from him or her."[13]

One of the primary ways that SNCC began to cultivate relationships and build strength within the local community was by emphasizing shared participation in meetings, trainings, workshops, and even conversations. "We were trying to give the people we were living and working with ownership of the movement," Bob Moses explained. "The meetings—that's your tool for building….And there you get into what has come to be called participatory democracy…in which the people who are meeting really get more and more of a feeling that this is [their] meeting."[14] One of the ways that SNCC sought to transfer the sense of meeting ownership from organizer to local community members was by talking about the concept of leadership itself. This had the potential to undermine internalized notions among SNCC workers and community residents about what made a legitimate leader. SNCC activist Gwen Patton explained, "SNCC's concept of organizing was for its workers to serve as assistants in the development of indigenous leadership and to build up trust in the community."[15]

As SNCC projects became more firmly rooted in the community, local people often turned into SNCC organizers. Simultaneously, as SNCC publicized their activities, new volunteers from elsewhere also arrived. In this context, the use of meetings as a space for leadership training was even more crucial as the SNCC staff were engaged in a process of

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[13] Sherrod, Columbia interview, 46-47, 47, 59.

[14] Bob Moses, interview (December 9, 1992), with Francesca Polletta, quoted in "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice" in *Mobilization: An International Journal* 10.2 (2010): 271-288, 276.

[15] Gwen Patton, "Born Freedom Fighter," in Faith Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 578-588.

political education themselves. Often in these situations, the organizer would introduce a problem to be discussed and participants would then talk about the key issues and options available. This was not only valuable for developing innovative ideas, it was also a key part of their shared political education. Bob Moses said that it became clear early on in Mississippi, "that sustaining the work would require a consensus that linked [different parts of the] community. Such a consensus could override specific points of disagreement."[16]

SNCC's organizing projects not only encouraged local people to participate in decision-making and strategizing, but the experience of participating in shared action and struggle began to break down hierarchical divisions within the Black community as well. In Albany, Georgia in 1961, SNCC staff helped initiate the Albany movement, where traditional middle class leaders joined together with the working class and poor people in a campaign of nonviolent direct action. The result was mass arrests (over seven hundred in jail by the end of the first week). As a result, Sherrod recalled, new alliances developed within the Black community, who "came to know each other as people, and not as classes." "Doctors and lawyers and teachers and domestics walked together to jail, and got to know each other in the cells, as they sat next to each other, and felt, breathed, and slept the passion that they had about their own desires to be free." Local activist Janie Culbreath agreed, saying, "You find people walking together, people talking together. People who would never think they would speak to this person, or that person…" The community, she suggested, was "not the same anymore."[17]

The Albany movement's president, William Anderson, said the people in the movement "made a determination within their own minds that they would never accept that segregated

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[16] Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 54-55.

[17] Sherrod and Culbreath quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 69. Hogan, on Albany Movement, 66-77.

society as it was, anymore." Bernice Johnson Reagon, a SNCC worker from Albany, said it gave her "the power to challenge *any* line that limits me."[18] In the words of Historian Wesley Hogan, Sherrod attempted to use SNCC meetings as a way to "[teach] people to become their own leaders and think for themselves." He "taught others to value their own experiences as vital knowledge, the most central information of their lives….He emphasized that it was *they* and not him, who knew best how to solve their problems."[19]

Throughout organizing projects in Mississippi, community meetings became an important part of developing consciousness. Historian John Dittmer called them the "most effective organizing tool." According to Bob Moses, the mass meeting was an "energy machine." Michael Thelwell explained, "In the meeting, everything—uncertainty, fear, even desperation— finds expression, and there is comfort and sustenance in 'talkin' 'bout hit.'" Meeting attendees could talk about "whatever troubles their minds—mostly the absence of food, money, work, and the oppressiveness of the police[…]loss of credit, eviction, and voting." Dittmer called the meetings a "combination of spontaneous testimony, old-fashioned preaching, wickedly hilarious observations about the character of white opposition, and inspiring oratory from the young organizers." Through community meetings people "began to acquire a new sense of themselves as a people in the community and in that county who were willing to take a stand and take some risk…"[20] Fannie Lou Hamer, who became one of SNCC's most powerful organizers after 1962, remembered her sense that other civil rights groups, like the NAACP, were primarily interested in the needs of Black homeowners and others in the middle class. After encountering SNCC's

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[18] Anderson, quoted in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990)*,* 113; Reagon in interview with Dick Cluster, *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee* Boston South End, 1979, 23.
[19] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 75.
[20] Bob Moses, Michael Thelwell, quoted in John Dittmer, *Local People*, 131.

community projects in LeFlore County, Mississippi, she recognized that SNCC was different. Through this, she said, she felt "treated like a human being, whether the kids were white or black."[21] Through the community projects started through SNCC, she felt that African Americans had "the chance to act as people with power."[22]

Sometimes SNCC's most powerful act was to model fearlessness in the face of repression. Eddie Johnson recalled what it was like to witness SNCC's Charles McLaurin in Indianola, Mississippi during July 1964: "They saw a policeman ask to talk to McLaurin. And they saw McLaurin say, 'Wait till I'm finished talking.' And McLaurin went on and talked. And they sang 'Ain't gonna let no policeman turn us around.'" Johnson called them, "Brave people ready to join you in the fight for freedom."[23]

SNCC workers saw themselves as part of the community they were working in, and often framed their organizing work as a way to unite local people and SNCC workers together in a broader struggle for racial justice. Bob Moses emphasized the need to recruit young Black people "who identified with SNCC…[and] with each other in terms…of being from Mississippi and more or less thinking that their job, and even their life's work, would be to work to make some sense of living in Mississippi." Moses interpreted the recruitment process in SNCC to be about developing African American political actors in a very locally oriented frame. In this way, SNCC was committed to sharing in the development of a locally oriented Black consciousness.[24]

While building local community power among Black people was a primary way that SNCC facilitated a foundation for building Black consciousness, Charles Sherrod actually

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[21] Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne and Howard Romaine, 1966 (transcript). Anne Romaine Papers. SHSW.

[22] Fannie Lou Hamer, quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 80.

[23] Eddie Johnson quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 91.

[24] Moses, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle,* 77; Bob Moses, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," *Liberation* 14 (January 1970), 14-15.

pursued a way to use white people as a way to strengthen Black consciousness. Though SNCC would eventually make the broad programmatic decision to bring white volunteers into SNCC in 1963 and again in 1964, Charles Sherrod sought to recruit white SNCC workers in the Albany project much earlier. Sherrod saw white people as a tool for Black liberation. They gave the Albany project expanded access to resources. "White people were in charge of the news media, they had all the money in the country," Sherrod explained. Though "[t]hey would give to causes that they identified with," he reasoned, "…white people in this country didn't care enough about us…[t]hey cared about white people." To gain access to those resources, he thought, Albany could use white volunteers.[25]

Though Sherrod's approach was unusual for SNCC in 1962, SNCC leadership approved, in large part, he said, because they knew it would not cost them any money. In Sherrod's estimation, his aims were met. By 1963, he said, "we had gone through a year of South Georgia being number one in the papers all across the country…[if] I wanted to get in the news, I could get in the news. I could make an issue. I could determine the issue. Any issue I wanted to determine, I could make an issue of it, right then, because I had the tools to do it." For Sherrod, white people offered the movement three things: "one, fund-raising; two, promotion of image and communications…[and three,] [g]etting work done; getting busy work done; getting records kept. We probably had some of the best records in the group. I made everybody write. I made everybody keep reports."[26] The results, were effective for supporting the movement:

> That's the reason we got a ship load of blankets: because this white here has got a cousin who's director of a factory in such and such a place. We got this money because this guy here is in jail, and his daddy is a corporation executive. And in order to get his son out—he's going to come to get his son out. Without getting his comrades out, his son isn't going to want to get out—unless he can help get the rest of them out.[27]

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[25] Sherrod interview, Columbia, 62.

[26] Ibid., 63; 63-64.

[27] Ibid., 65.

In this way, Sherrod's approach was explicitly to gain access to the resources that white people had greater access to. Though this rationale was not directly linked to the expansion of Black consciousness, and in fact reflected SNCC's broad commitment to liberal allies, Sherrod's approach itself reflected an important kind of centering of Blackness in the struggle. Unlike narratives of respectability, morality, and merit that drove earlier SNCC approaches and wider civil rights interactions with white allies, Sherrod was explicitly uninterested in proving the worth of the project to white allies. Instead, his strategic emphasis was directed explicitly toward the impact white resources would have on the Black community.

But Sherrod's emphasis on interracial work in SNCC was also driven more directly by a desire to make a positive psychological impact on Black consciousness. "[T]he idea that white is superior," he said, "has eaten into the minds of the people, black and white."[28] Sherrod claimed he was getting at the root of the problem in Albany, Georgia by encouraging African Americans to face their internalized fear of white people. "All our lives we've had to bow and scrape, laugh when there was nothing funny and scratch our heads and say yes sir. We want to change that. We want to be men; that's what the power of the vote can do.…It's people like you[…]who are going to change this country. And we'll do it together." This, for Sherrod, was a key part of transforming Black consciousness.[29] "There is an indoctrination," he explained, "…Negroes don't stick together…White is right…Jail is a hammer…But we broke the hammer of jail with another maxim: 'A jail is just another house,' and with this lever we broke the other two."[30]

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[28] Sherrod, quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 72; Carson, *In Struggle,* 75-76. Anne Braden, "The Images are Broken; Students Challenge Rural Georgia," *Southern Patriot* (December 1962), 1.

[29] Sherrod, quoted in Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 139-140.

[30] Sherrod, quoted in Zinn, *The New Abolitionists*, 146.

Thus, while centering Black consciousness and pride did not explicitly defy the larger complex of the civil rights liberal framework, Sherrod and other Black SNCC workers contributed to placing Black humanity at the center of struggle. Inherent in this was a tension between the kinds of on the ground work that SNCC was doing and the larger political framework they were still operating within. Their everyday practices and local goals were often geared toward encouraging pride, Black consciousness, and self-determined political power within the local community. While these did not reflect a radical agenda, the centering of themes related to Black humanity opened space for a framework of struggle that moved beyond the bounds of liberal alliance. In this way, though they were functioning within the liberal framework of the civil rights movement, some of SNCC's on-the-ground political practices foreshadowed the more explicit move toward Black Power in 1966.

The Limits of Liberalism: Terror, Political Education, and Local People

Though SNCC's on-the-ground community organizing efforts encouraged the development of Black consciousness and Black self-determined political participation within local communities and among Black SNCC workers, SNCC's organizing approach was fundamentally rooted in a liberal framework. Because of this, the same practices and values that encouraged Black consciousness simultaneously limited SNCC's ability to enact meaningful change in people's lives. SNCC was programmatically limited by their consistent reliance on liberal allies, the federal government, and mainstream press for resources, protection, and publicity. They were also limited by their commitment to gaining access to existing political processes and mainstream institutions. However, beyond these external alliances, SNCC's organizing efforts were fraught with the contradictions and challenges posed by internalized

liberalism within the organization. Enacted through divisions and hierarchies including class, race, region, and gender, SNCC's organizing approach often de-centered people in the local Black communities they sought to empower. Though liberal declensionist narratives suggest otherwise, it is these problems, rather than SNCC's later attempts to overcome them, that more accurately derailed SNCC's trajectory. Even during SNCC's celebrated organizational zenith, it is the presence, rather than the absence of internalized liberalism, that defined their limits.

Developing relationships in the community, as well as practices and values associated with their new community-organizing framework, expanded SNCC workers' political education immensely. However, these lessons were also always in relation to their everyday experiences of violence and repression from local whites who went to grave lengths to protect the system of white supremacy in the South. Beyond the immediate physical threat to the lives and safety of local people and organizers, violence and repression also had more indirect implications. The fear of death, increased violence, arrest, or other forms retribution often increased local anxiety about the role of SNCC workers in the community.

SNCC workers' experience in the organizations' very first voter registration project is illustrative of the continued and varied terror SNCC workers and Black residents faced daily in all of their organizing campaigns throughout the 1960s. Within the first month of SNCC's 1961 campaign in Pike, Amite, and Walthall counties, based out of McComb, Mississippi, SNCC workers experienced multiple arrests and assaults in their attempts to register local Black voters. Bob Moses was arrested in Amite County, jailed for two days before posting bond through the NAACP, and assaulted by the sheriff's cousin, who, after Moses pressed charges, was acquitted within a week of the assault. Moses was with another SNCC worker, Travis Britt, when they were surrounded by a mob of angry whites outside the Amite County courthouse and Britt was

beaten. John Hardy, also a SNCC worker, was beaten with a pistol by the county registrar in Waltham County while attempted to assist local African Americans to register. He was subsequently arrested on disorderly conduct charges. Another group of SNCC workers, including Charles Sherrod, Diane Nash, Jim Bevel, and Marion Barry, initiated a series of nonviolent direct action training workshops in McComb, which attracted a number of eager Black high school students. From that group, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes, who would soon become key SNCC field workers in Mississippi, were arrested after a sit-in at a Woolworths. A few days later, three more Black teens were arrested for staging a sit-in at a Greyhound bus terminal. Included was a fifteen-year-old girl, Brenda Travis. Her presence contributed to the community outrage over the fact that the five high school students remained in jail for over a month.[31]

Though perpetual violence and repeated arrests taught SNCC workers difficult lessons about the extent of the resistance they faced, nothing compared to SNCC's first encounter with the murder of a local resident in connection with their voter registration activities. Herbert Lee, a local Black farmer, father of nine children, and resident of Amite County, had been assisting SNCC with voter registration efforts. On September 25th, 1961 Lee's neighbor, state representative E.H. Hurst, shot and killed Lee in front of a handful of witnesses outside the local cotton gin. This murder came the day after a U.S. Justice Department Attorney, John Doar, had left McComb. After continued unresponsiveness on the part of Justice Department to requests for help from SNCC workers in relation to the aforementioned incidents, Doar had finally been dispatched to McComb to investigate the violence and police misconduct that SNCC had reported. On September 24th Moses accompanied Doar to speak with former NAACP leader

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[31] Carson, *In Struggle*, 47-48; Moses, *Radical Equations*, 52-55; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom.*

E.W. Steptoe, another key local African American activist who was active in the voter registration efforts. They asked Steptoe about any possible danger in the area, and he replied that his neighbor, E.H. Hurst, who was also a state representative, had been making threats against people involved in voter registration work. He also told them that he believed himself and two others to be in particular danger. Their names were George Reese and Herbert Lee. The next day, Doar left town and Herbert Lee was murdered.[32]

The impact of Lee's murder on SNCC was profound. For one, it stopped their voter registration project almost completely for a number of years as local African Americans were no longer willing to risk attempting to register. But it was also emotionally devastating for the young workers, especially Moses. Lee's wife approached him and fellow SNCC worker Chuck McDew at Lee's funeral. "Looking into our faces," Moses recalled, "she spit out in bitter accusing tones, 'You killed my husband! You killed my husband!'" Afterwards, Moses said, "second thoughts seemed about to immobilize me. Can we do this? Can we really keep doing this?" Rather than be dissuaded, his conclusion was that "staying with this work was more

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[32] Carson, *In Struggle,* 48-49; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 58; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 56-59; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 49-51. Quote from Bob Moses in transcript of tape recording made Fall 1962, reprinted in Moses, "Mississippi 1961-1962," *Liberation* 14 (January 1970): 7-17; SNCC fundraising handbill, "Facts…McComb, Mississippi," n.d., CR Collection, SHSW. More detail on Lee's murder, and part of Bob Moses' account of what occurred, is worth repeating here for its parallel to the recent police murder in Ferguson, Missouri. State representative Hurst claimed that shooting the unarmed Lee was an act of self-defense. Moses, who had to identify the body, described this: "Lee's body lay on the ground that morning for two hours, uncovered… [because] no one in Liberty would touch it….finally [they] got a funeral home in McComb to take it in….They had a coroner's jury that very same afternoon. Hurst was acquitted." As SNCC later publicized in a handbill, "This representative of the people was never arrested, never spent one hour in jail, and was acquitted by a coroner's jury." Moses recalled reading in the local paper the next day, "a little item on the front page [that said] a Negro had been shot as he was trying to attack EH Hurst." Moses further recalled that there were no other facts given: "There was no mention that Lee was a farmer, that he had a family, nine kids, beautiful kids, and the he had farmed all his life in Amite County. It was as if he had been drunk or something and had gotten into a fight and gotten shot." Quotes Hogan (Moses) and Burner, 58 (SNCC Handbill).

important that ever. It was the only way to make sense out of Herbert Lee's death." This, along with all of the other forms of unceasing terror enacted against SNCC workers and local people, became part of the reason that Moses and SNCC staffers committed themselves even further to their organizing efforts.[33]

Yet the response from Lee's wife demonstrated a central tension that SNCC workers had to face in the process of community organizing. Though many SNCC workers were from small towns and rural areas in the South, they were still perceived as outsiders when they entered a new area, in part because of the nature of their work. Claims of organizers being "outside agitators" was, and continues to be, a primary response used by local officials to dismiss community mobilizing efforts and dissuade local participation, regardless of who actually initiated them. At the same time, this sense of division between "organizers" and "locals" could also be present among SNCC workers and the local communities they were working in.

Their sense of difference was most often felt when SNCC workers found themselves pushing reluctant local people to challenge societal norms and face potential danger; more than stepping outside of their comfort zone, they were being asked to face the prospect of retaliatory violence and even death. This kind of organizing work was hard. Moses later admitted that the constant terror made him "very, very depressed." Constance Curry, one of SNCC's white advisors, said "the long years of struggle…violence…anguish," all took a "terrible, terrible, toll." She saw "the changes in Bob Moses," who she explained was very sensitive, "…it broke his heart."[34]

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[33] Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them,* 57; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 510; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 50-51.

[34] Moses, quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 61; Constance Curry in, Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 107-108.

For SNCC workers, facing daily terror and, increasingly, recognizing the ways that their efforts had a direct impact, both positive and negative, on the local people with whom they worked, contributed to their own need to think through and process their experiences. In this way, meetings, workshops, trainings, and discussions among themselves were not only a part of their community organizing program, they became part of how they dealt with and made sense of their experiences. Bob Moses explains, "As organizers we were just getting our feet wet, but in personal as well as political terms we were beginning to see the outlines of what organizing in the state required. I learned to live with my fears. Organizing myself was a necessary first step."[35] SNCC staffers soon learned that part of organizing oneself was recognizing the power you wielded as an organizer. Moses, whose own organizing philosophy was heavily influenced by Camus, recognized the simultaneous "need to cease being 'a victim' while at the same time not becoming 'an executioner.'"[36] Navigating these tensions became one of the central struggles within SNCC.

The Limits of Liberalism: Romanticizing the Struggle

SNCC's community organizing framework was a source of pride for SNCC workers yet it was often tied to justifications and narratives (particularly when translating it to outside audiences) that fostered greater psychological divisions between SNCC organizers and the local communities they organized. SNCC advisor and historian Howard Zinn reflected this in his 1964 history of SNCC, which began by celebrating the great sacrifice that SNCC workers made in committing themselves to community organizing. He called it a "cause for wonder," leaving

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[35] Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 55.
[36] Carson, *In Struggle,* 46; Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 95.

"ripples of astonishment behind," that those from "the Negro colleges of the South, the Ivy League universities of the North, the small and medium colleges all over the country" chose to "turn on their pasts, to decide to live and work twenty-four hours a day in the most dangerous region of the United States." It was "no irresponsible whim of adolescence," he continued, "when young people of sixteen or twenty or twenty-five turn away from school, job, family, all the tokens of success in modern America, to take up new lives, hungry and hunted, in the hinterland of the Deep South."[37]

Zinn's heroic and sacrificial formulation of SNCC left little place for people from the local communities themselves to be part of the freedom struggle. In an exception he noted, "Others found it easier—and harder—for they came right out of the Black Belt and, even though they tasted college, they had nowhere then to go but back towards danger and freedom: John Lewis, Sam Block, Willie Peacock, Lafayette Surney, MacArthur Cotton, Lawrence Guyot and too many more to name." Though Zinn admitted the members in this last group were too numerous to name, they were nonetheless the afterthought in his narrative of privilege and sacrifice. The Deep South, their home, was reduced only to a symbol of danger, where they were "hungry and hunted," trapped, with nowhere else to go. Unlike their northern counterparts, whose college attendance indicated their access to "all the tokens of success," the "tast[e] of college" for these southern organizers was instead a symbol of their destitution. Beyond this, there was no mention of the community members who were not a part of SNCC staff in this characterization. Instead, they became part of the background in which SNCC was organizing. When they were mentioned, Zinn framed them as a "cushion" that SNCC workers used against their critics: "The SNCC youngster is in the midst of his people, surrounded by them, protected

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[37] Howard Zinn, *SNCC*, 3, 5.

by them. To be cut off, by harsh criticism of his 'extremism,' from Northern white intellectuals or from those in national political power is a minor blow, cushioned by a popularity based on the poor and the powerless, but perhaps even more comforting because of that." In spite of SNCC workers' emphasis on unity, and Zinn's estimation that the SNCC worker was "in the midst of" and "surrounded by" his people, such narratives ran counter to the pursuit of relationships and shared community at the heart of SNCC's organizing framework.[38]

In an attempt to celebrate the SNCC workers' bravery Zinn betrayed another kind of privilege. "The mood of these young people," he wrote, "which they convey to everyone around them in the midst of poverty, violence, terror, and centuries of bitter memories, is joy, confidence, the vision of victory…" Similarly he said, "They are happy warriors, a refreshing contrast to the revolutionaries of old. They smile and wave while being taken off in paddy wagons; they laugh and sing behind bars." Though these descriptions were meant to characterize the energy or strength among SNCC workers, they also convey the relative privilege of the organizer. As organizers, SNCC workers recognized a usable value in such incidents. While they did face grave danger, which should not be understated, daily terror, the threat of violence, or an arrest meant something very different for incoming SNCC staffers and volunteers than it did for local people in their own communities. For SNCC workers, to put one's body on the line was an act of individual sacrifice that was an extension of their previous decision to leave their lives and homes and move into unfamiliar communities in the Deep South in order to participate in the movement. For people who had lived in the local community for their entire lives, the stakes and meaning of the risks they faced were different. Local people's bodies were engaged in mutually constitutive, complex networks of community support and survival: their labor, social roles, and

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[38] Zinn, *SNCC*, 5, 8-9.

relationships provided support, sustenance, and resources for families and community that extended well beyond their own lives. It was much easier to smile and wave when arrested, to face terror with joy, when you did not have to worry about the loss of your job or the immediate safety of your family. And though SNCC workers felt as if they were treated like family by the local communities in which they worked, most SNCC workers had another family and home to go to if needed. For local people, their lives and the broader networks that they were a part of were on the line in a different way.[39]

Gwendolyn Robinson (now Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons) worked as a project director in Laurel, Mississippi during Freedom Summer 1964. She remembered a sense of this disconnect from the growing awareness within the community that most volunteers would be leaving at the end of the summer. "I knew that the white reactionary forces were just waiting for the COFO volunteers to leave," she explained, "especially the white ones, so that they could step up their reign of unfettered terror." Though she knew the local activists with whom she had lived and worked "would not ask us to put our education on hold," she also "could see their concern for the future without all the human and material resources that we brought with us." Because of this, she said, "I felt a real commitment to the community." Robinson, along with two white women from California, chose to stay on after the end of Freedom Summer, but the fact that this was a decision demonstrated their relative positions of privilege.[40]

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[39] Zinn, *SNCC,* 4-5, 5. On being treated like Family see Moses, *Radical Equations*, 56.
[40] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," in Faith Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 31.

SNCC's commitment to building community organizations with local control of decision-making was a central part of their organizing approach and their egalitarian politics. Yet somewhat paradoxically, their emphasis on local decision-making had the potential to exacerbate the unequal power dynamics between organizer and "organized." If Zinn's narrative romanticized SNCC workers for their sacrifice and bravery, some SNCC activists had the tendency to "romanticize" local people as a result of SNCC's local organizing values. Many in SNCC most critical of this romanticizing tendency suggested that it was often the northern and middle class SNCC activists who were guilty of this. James Forman called this "local people-itis": "This carried with it the idea that local people could do no wrong; that no one, especially somebody from outside the community, should initiate any kind of action or assume any form of leadership." Michael Thelwell critiqued this tendency in a position paper entitled, "Mississippi: A Metaphysic Wrapped in a Mystique." He called this "bourgeois sentimentalism." Instead of strengthening the sense of personal and community power, this romanticization contributed to a rather flattened, uncomplicated, and less dynamic vision of "local people" that made them less, rather than more, fully human in the eyes of some SNCC workers.[41]

Though SNCC sit-ins during 1960 reflected an investment in mainstream perceptions of respectability, SNCC approached respectability differently in their roles as community organizers. One of the ways that SNCC workers sought to build community with local people was to pay attention to social conventions, practices, and mores. Gwendolyn Robinson remembered enforcing norms of respectability in Laurel: "Given the conservative nature of this community and our need to gain and maintain approval," she recalled, "I did insist on a dress code of no shorts in the streets and generally modest dress. Since the church was such a strong

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[41] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; repr., Washington DC: Open Hand, 1985), 422.

and respected institution in the community, we all had to attend church regularly, generally with our host families."[42] This investment in respectability reflected both a desire to blend in and also an expression of difference. White Freedom Summer volunteer, Heather Tobias Booth, recalled the sense that she "really had to be on good behavior." She was asked to bring a Bible with her and, though she was Jewish, was expected to attend church every Sunday. Through her experience, Booth recognized the organizing value of this practice. "I realized that this church was a major center of their lives. It was what partly held them together. In times of real need, there were financial collections. You got information. It was social." Because of this, she said, "I didn't perceive it…as fundamentally a religious experience, but I saw it as a political experience in changing the world and in changing people's lives." Booth's assessment of her experience in church as a Freedom Summer volunteer demonstrates the kind of dual value of honoring local customs for SNCC organizers. Booth's willingness to attend church was because it was an access point to the community, and simultaneously, an expression of how she was changing local people's lives. Most likely, local people's lives were not so deeply affected by her presence at church yet this is part of the narrative that allowed SNCC workers to push themselves outside of their own norms.[43]

Paying attention to local norms in terms clothes, customs, and politics became a part of how SNCC workers identified with and simultaneously romanticized locals, occasionally approaching their interests, habits, and values as quaint or parochial. According to SNCC associate Gloria Wade-Gayles, SNCC activists viewed locals, whom she called "black people of the soil," as "a fascinating primitive people." SNCC workers approached them as "racial and cultural artifacts," she wrote, who they could "talk about in the life of comfort to which most of

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[42] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.
[43] Heather Tobias Booth, Columbia Oral History Archives, interview, 27-28, 29.

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us returned."[44] At the same time, adopting local customs also became a marker of a particular SNCC style and mystique. SNCC leader Cleveland Sellers explains, "…the organization's members had begun to walk, talk, and dress like the poor black farmers and sharecroppers of rural Georgia and Mississippi." By the end of 1962, he explained, SNCC had a "definable lifestyle," a "powerful esprit de corps. They worked, ate, socialized and slept together, read the same books and wore the same kind of clothing."[45] The classic SNCC overalls, for example, came to be a symbol of SNCC's élan in activist circles. They set them apart from other mainstream civil rights organizations. Eschewing the suit and tie for the overalls and work shirt indicated their commitment to the rural poor African American communities and the struggle.

Yet by adopting the style of southern sharecroppers, the attempt to blend in became, simultaneously, an expression of difference. Though not quite parodying the local sharecropper, SNCC's overalls nonetheless set SNCC organizers apart from the community they were trying to embrace. South African singer Miriam Makeba responded negatively to SNCC's style of dress, exemplified by her soon-to-be husband Stokely Carmichael: "He and his friends say that being dirty and wearing tattered clothes means that a person identifies with the masses. This makes me mad, because it is just wrong and sounds patronizing." Makeba, who grew up poor outside of Johannesburg, responded, "Hey man, I grew up with the 'masses.' We were not proud of our poverty."[46] In her examination of the politics of dress among SNCC women, historian Tanisha C. Ford explains, "Although Carmichael wore the denim uniform, in Makeba's view he had the

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[44] Gloria Wade-Gayles, *Pushed Back to Strength; A Black Woman's Journey Home* (Boston, 1992), 178; Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress," *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 3 (August 2013), 625-658 (quotation p. 641).

[45] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1973), 53-54.

[46] Miriam Makeba with James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New York: 1987), 155-56, quoted in Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress," 625-658 (quotation p. 643).

privilege of putting it on and taking it off as he saw fit."[47] In this sense, the politics of dress reflected part of the challenge for SNCC: workers from northern and middle class backgrounds, like Carmichael, had the potential to reproduce hierarchies of difference even in their attempts at building shared community. At the same time, the attempt to approach local communities with respect typically meant something very different for Black organizers from the South. Often these workers pushed to respect local traditions and norms with much more seriousness than their northern, middle class counterparts. In this way, the same practice could have a very different meaning in different hands. SNCC's encounter with mores of sexuality and race provide example of this.

The Limits of Liberalism: Race, Sex, and Local People

SNCC staffers were well aware of the tensions, both exciting and challenging, that the increased presence of white volunteers brought to their organizing efforts. Some SNCC workers believed that increased white volunteers would help SNCC realize its beloved interracial community. By pursuing this, they could demonstrate to local people another way of interacting with whites beyond the oppressive racial hierarchy of the Deep South. SNCC's ideological or philosophical intentions drew on SNCC students' early conception of themselves as a "beloved community." Reminiscent of the initial philosophy of early CORE in the 1940s, they sought to operate as a realized interracial community and "make the means reflect the ends." This was partially an organizing vision, but it was also connected to the excitement of such a possibility. Though not expressed explicitly, in practice, part of pursuing this idyllic interracial community included developing interracial friendships, romances, and sexual relationships. Of course the

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[47] Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress," 644.

reality of this was not idyllic at all, as like all interpersonal relationships, motivations and practices were complicated, drawing on existing power hierarchies as much as they subverted them. Sex and romance among SNCC workers, and sex and romance between SNCC workers and local people, brought up a host of challenges and potential for hard consequences.

More than fuel for excitement, the taboo of interracial sexuality was a primary flashpoint for racial violence in the South. Probably more than anything else, white supremacist narratives justified themselves through the need to police Black sexuality and protect white women's sexuality. Sex between white men and Black women had a very different character in the white southern imagination that did sex between Black men and white women. In a disgusting reversal, Black women, who were victims of sexual violence, rape, assault, and murder at the hands of white men for centuries, were more often characterized as immoral, sexual deviants, and aggressors, while the motivations and character of their white rapists and assailants, even amidst open acknowledgement of their violation and abuse, was not under question. Black men, like Black women, were similarly characterized as sexual aggressors, deviants, and immoral. But these characterizations were key justification for protecting the allegedly pure and chaste white women from the Black sexual predators. As Gwendolyn Robinson explained it, "Gender relations were difficult, to say the least. For many white Mississippi males this was the thing that galled them the most. They thought all black men wanted to rape all white women, so they were livid over the fact that white women were living in black homes where black men lived."[48] Thus, deviant Black sexuality became the narrative to justify both forms of white supremacist terror

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[48] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.

and violence: sexual abuse and violence against Black women and also systematic violence, lynching, and murder of Black men.[49]

In this context, interracial relationships in the Deep South were nothing about which to be cavalier. Unsurprisingly, the mortal danger of interracial relationships in the South meant that local Black communities often seemed as committed to maintaining racial segregation in social relationships as their white counterparts. Because of this, norms of respectability, particularly around sexuality and romance, were very important. Some SNCC workers, particularly those who were Black and from the South themselves, understood this. "As a black southerner," Gwendolyn Robinson explained, "I was much more acquainted with these mores and therefore insisted that my insights on these matters had to be respected."[50] However, this was less often the case for white volunteers and those who had not been as intimately connected to the climate of sexualized racial terror in the South. In this dynamic, SNCC's vision of enacting a beloved community through visions of interracial harmony itself betrayed a kind of privilege that smacked against centuries of hard lessons in the South.

In seeking to enact this anti-hierarchical, interracial vision in the rural Black communities of the Deep South, SNCC workers betrayed another kind of social, political, and historical naivety. The logic of exposure rested on the notion that in witnessing examples of white and Black people living, working, and being together, local Blacks would somehow also be compelled to want the same. This ignored the gravity of the psychological history of white oppression in the daily lives of Black people, implying that their mere exposure was all that was needed to encourage the creation of a beloved interracial community. Further, it suggested that

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[49] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[50] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.

rural southern Blacks were not already familiar with these concerns. Personal historical narratives from African Americans who grew up in the South abound with stories of having notions of human equality shattered when they first confronted racism in interactions with white childhood playmates and their families. Herbert Lee, for example, was murdered by his white neighbor and childhood playmate, E.H. Hurst. In this context the idea that rural southern Blacks were unaware of a vision of racial harmony seems unlikely. Instead, it is more likely that Black southerners had already faced and deliberately moved past such interpersonal ideals.

But beyond the impact this vision of a beloved community would have on local people, it is also important to note that racial harmony certainly did not actually exist among white and black workers in SNCC. These contradictions were obvious to local people around them. Though SNCC workers were unwilling to address this issue outright, internal racial tensions were clear to a local minister in one Mississippi project meeting, who said in the midst of a long debate about the nature of authority: "The thing that bothers me is that there really is a basic black-white problem here which you don't say but which is at the bottom of a lot of what you're saying. Why don't you deal with your black-white problem?"[51]

At the same time, some SNCC workers were also aware of the excitement of interracial sexuality. "…[W]e did some crazy things," Charles Sherrod recalled. "I'm talking about in the South, too. Right underneath their nose." Yet this too was deeply complicated. Sherrod, whose Albany project was the first to integrate a significant number of white workers in SNCC's community organizing efforts, recalled the sense that interracial sexuality was also connected to the political process of overcoming fear among Black southern men. "Sex had a lot to do

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[51] Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), Minutes, Fifth District Meeting, November 25 1964, Mary E. King Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW), Madison, Wisconsin.

with…breaking down those fears," he said. "[I]t made a lot of difference." But, he suggested, it was fraught. "Most of us were young, you know," he explained. "All that curiosity, and fear. You have fear of a rope around your neck in these contexts." "I guess a psychiatrist could better explain that than I can," he continued. "Sex and white women…Helped to alleviate that fear…"[52]

Yet as some SNCC workers sought to challenge societal racial and sexual norms, they were also simultaneously enacting them. This was particularly true in the perceptions of sexuality between Black men and white women. Gwendolyn Robinson recalls the, "mutual attraction between the black men and white women," which, she says, was made "even more irresistible" by "the forbidden nature of those relationships, even in the North..."[53] SNCC workers observed that relationships between Black men and white women were more prominent than other configurations, however they were only one part of what historian Cynthia Griggs Fleming has identified as "a broad range of sexual attractions and combinations" within SNCC. Fleming points out that to the extent that this had a negative impact on Black women's perception of themselves the negative impact was equal, if not greater, on movement politics and safety. Sociologist Doug McAdam has argued that one of the reasons for tension between Black and white women was that sexual relationships with Black male SNCC leaders gave white women access to power within the organization. Historian Paula Giddings contends this was not the case, arguing, "the influence of Black women was actually increasing." Further, she argues, it was white women who were more often "relegated to minor responsibilities, in part because of indiscriminate sexual behavior." In this sense, the amount of attention that romantic and sexual relationships between Black men and white women received risked redirecting focus away from the main goals of the movement. Rather than an expression of beloved community, it was more

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[52] Sherrod interview, Columbia, p.61.
[53] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.

often a derailment that had real consequences. Black women and Black men in SNCC recognized the dangers of this in terms of retaliatory responses from the white community and also in its effects on their ability to build relationships with local African Americans. Such tensions brought increasing challenges to the vision of building a shared sense of community.[54]

In light of these competing understandings of race and sexuality within SNCC, southern Black leaders often went to great lengths to make sure SNCC workers abided the norms of respectability within the Black community. This was part of the general function of how SNCC envisioned building relationships and developing trust, but around the question of sexuality, this was often most stressed. Charles Sherrod recalled:

> I told the whites…they can't walk down the street with a black girl. I told them 'you think you all can deal. I'm saying that you can't be involved with that.' I tell the blacks the same thing: you can't walk down the street hand in hand with some white girl. It's part of being young and curious, and I certainly had the same drives that the others were having so, knowing what problems could arise in myself. I was speaking for all of us. 'We got to be careful. Wait 'til you go to Atlanta; wait till you go to New York.[55]

Other project directors were even less forgiving. Ivanhoe Donaldson, project director in Holly Springs, Mississippi during Freedom Summer, forbade interracial relationships, arguing they would "provide local whites with the initiative they need to come in here and kill all of us. Even if the whites don't find out about them, the people will, and we won't be able to do anything afterwards to convince them that our primary interest here is political." As Donaldson's warning suggested, there was a strong sense that SNCC leaders needed to police the internal behavior of SNCC workers, particularly around sexuality. "Courtships among COFO volunteers were permitted but were to be carried out in a low-key way with no public displays of affection,"

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[54] Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 101-141, quote p.136; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 124; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 302.
[55] Sherrod interview, Columbia, 66.

Gwendolyn Robinson explained. "We had to respect the moral code of the community, which was very strict in comparison to the lifestyles of most of the volunteers."[56]

Because of these challenges, Robinson recognized the need to manage the incredibly volatile and complicated race, sex, and power dynamics at play. She explained, "As one of the few women project directors in the state, I was particularly sensitive to sexual harassment. One of my few nonnegotiable edicts was to disallow all forms of sexual harassment…" In particular, she said, she "declare[d] all underage local women off-limits to project males. There would be one warning and one warning only. If it happened again, out you went."[57] Sherrod also focused a lot of energy on managing romantic and sexual dynamics of the staff. He recognized the complexity of this task as project director in terms of both public perceptions and also the experiences of SNCC workers themselves:

> I had black and white women, black and white males. To say nothing about what the white community was thinking, or the black community was thinking; what about this community of thirty or forty young people? What about us? What were we thinking? So I know that we had to be halfway clean ourselves. We couldn't just allow things to go any way they went, because one little spark, one of us getting mad because of them was taking another one's girlfriend or boyfriend, and you got an explosion out of proportion to the problem.[58]

As a result, Sherrod spent a good deal of time managing these internal relationships, which put him in a supervisory role. "[T]here were times—we didn't have all the accommodations. When I had thirty, forty kids, I put this woman in one room, the men in the other room, and I slept at the door. I knew what that was about."[59]

As this suggests, project directors were serious and dedicated to managing sexuality. Project directors regularly complained about the time they spent dealing with issues of sexuality

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[56] Ivanhoe Donaldson, quoted in Clevland Sellers, *The River of No Return,* 96; Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.
[57] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.
[58] Sherrod interview, Columbia, p. 66-67.
[59] Ibid., 66.

and romance among SNCC workers. "Becoming a sexual relations counselor was another one of the tasks that was in my unwritten job description," Gwendolyn Robinson explained, "Often this issue took up an inordinate amount of time and taxed me the most."[60] Charles Sherrod recalled a similar problem, explaining, "When you bring them down here you've got to supervise them twenty hours a day." He continued: "[T]hose kinds of things had to be dealt with." And while he claimed they were not always "difficult to deal with," they also "took a certain consistency, a certain amount of time and dedication…" It was important "to keep on top of them," Sherrod continued, "so that when a little incident occurred… you catch somebody screwing somebody in the toilet, or somewhere… it wouldn't get blown out of proportion."[61]

The tensions between policing sexuality/individual behavior in SNCC, justifications of respecting the community, and desires to live and enact racial harmony through pleasure and sexuality, were also simultaneously entwined with questions of power, authority and decision-making in SNCC. During and after Freedom Summer in particular, complaints of project directors' heavy-handedness, control, and abuse of power proliferated, often in response to what seemed to some to be arbitrary expressions of power. Charles Sherrod recalled being accused of being "so God-like or autocratic to a certain extent."[62] For Black women, critiques of their power were often tied to a host of sexist and racist narratives about being angry, controlling, man-hating, etc. Though Robinson described her leadership style as "feminist," "extremely democratic," even "sometimes to a fault," her attention to sexual harassment, which she said accounted for her "few top-down edicts," got her the reputation of an "Amazon," who hated

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[60] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29.
[61] Sherrod interview, Columbia, 66, 67.
[62] Ibid., 66.

men.[63] "[I had to] grow up real fast and assume an air of authority," Robinson explained, "especially with the white male volunteers, who could not believe that a black girl younger than they were was the project director. Boy, did I learn a lot about the northern liberal brand of racism and about male sexism."[64]

This reflects a broader dynamic that emerged at the end of 1963, after SNCC began actively recruiting northern white volunteers to work in Mississippi. It was further exacerbated when white northern recruitment expanded during Freedom Summer 1964. Often white, usually middle class and northern, SNCC workers challenged the authority of Black project directors on the grounds of being anti-democratic. Sometimes challenges were explicit, like Robinson's experience. But sometimes they were less direct, a generalized challenge to authority. Black SNCC worker Cleveland Sellers recalled Ivanhoe Donaldson's "long list of rules and regulations": "Everyone was to be on his job by eight-thirty each morning; no one was to make any trip into the city or county without leaving his time of departure and expected return on the check-out list in the office; no one was to be out after dark unless he was on official business; all shades were to be pulled as soon a the sun went down, and no one was to make a target of himself by casting a shadow on the shade; local whites and the police were to be avoided whenever possible and never unnecessarily provoked."[65]

According to sociologist Francesca Polletta, white volunteers complained of being "bombarded with rules—about not leaving the project, not using cars for their personal needs, not socializing with local young people..." However, they simultaneously witnessed instances of SNCC staff "ignoring the rules." In this context, internal tensions of hierarchy abounded. One

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[63] Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 29, 31.
[64] Ibid., 30.
[65] Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 95.

worker in Gulfport, MS challenged the "whole concept of project director as feudal lord." Echoing this, another complained, "people can't trust their project director," asking, "Who decides who goes where and what to do if people don't work out?" Many new volunteers came to see these internal dynamics as expressions of individual power mongering, calling project directors "taciturn." They drew on SNCC's values of community-oriented relationship building to point out the perceived contradictions. As another Gulfport volunteer explained, "There are people who are in positions of power and they are interested in retaining this power and then there are the have-nots." Polletta argues that this created a dynamic in which "an enormous amount of time was spent in project meetings discussing the roles, responsibilities, and prerogatives of project directors, with newcomers calling simultaneously for more guidance and more democracy."[66]

Though in their critiques white northern volunteers often took up the cause of defending SNCC's organizational values of participatory democracy, local decision-making, and consensus over authority, in light of the challenges project directors faced around issues of race, sex, and power, their critiques simultaneously exposed the lack of developed political analysis within SNCC. In one particularly illustrative example, a project director in Canton, Mississippi instructed the white volunteers that the movement would be better served if they left the project and worked on fundraising instead. Volunteers responded with accusations of staff authoritarianism. One white volunteer asked, "How can I hope to get rid of authoritarianism in Miss. if I leave it in the Canton staff?...It's like the bossman telling his sharecropper to get off the land just because the sharecropper thinks differently from the owner." That a northern white

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[66] Quotes from COFO Minutes, Fifth District Meeting, November 25 1964, Mary E. King Papers, SHS; Polletta, "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 275.

volunteer would find it acceptable to uncritically compare her situation to a southern sharecropper being evicted from her land not only reflects her own limits but also the inability of SNCC to preempt such blatant demonstrations of race and class privilege within its ranks. Further, the fact that this volunteer drew specifically on SNCC's own organizing values also illustrated how SNCC's organizing framework operated with a limited political analysis.[67]

The Limits of Liberalism: Decision-Making and the Failure of Ownership

Out of this tangle of race, power, sex, and privilege, critiques of internal power dynamics resulted in the very liberal phenomenon that the people most identified with Black southern local communities became symbols of oppressive hierarchy while northern, middle class, often white allies became champions of the people. The irony of this, however, is that while challenges to Black southern leadership emerged among northern volunteers on the basis of democracy, consensus, and anti-authoritarianism, part of SNCC's original emphasis on consensus and participatory democracy began specifically as an attempt to curb the tendencies of northern, middle class authority. As Polletta explains, "In their deliberations as a group, students dispensed with parliamentary procedure and strove for consensus. In part, they wanted to discourage sophisticated northern students from dominating discussion with their ready command of parliamentary maneuver."[68] This was a matter of practicality, as SNCC workers found it much easier to develop discussion with community members outside of such structures, but it was also a response to privilege. As one field worker described it, "white college-educated Northerners [had] a tendency to take command of an assembly through rapid-fire parliamentary maneuvers

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[67] COFO, Canton Valley View Staff Meeting, December 2, 1964. JoAnne Robinson Papers, SHSW.

[68] Polletta, "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 275.

which [left] local people baffled and offended." [69] Though participatory democracy and consensus processes later became associated with the white New Left, its origins in SNCC were "as a way to prevent northern whites' domination through their command of parliamentary maneuver. In other words, it was seen as black and southern rather than northern and white." [70] As Forman explained, "To some extent this represented a reaction to the tendency of white volunteers to 'take over' in black Mississippi, and in that sense it was a good thing to reassert the importance of local leadership. But too often 'local people-itis' meant simply an excuse for inaction. It became almost a religion." [71]

In spite of this recent history in SNCC, Black southern project directors had become the symbol of hierarchy and those with northern, white, and middle class backgrounds most often took on debates about power in the name of local people. This reinforced the dominant liberal narrative of "organizer" as savior and "organized" as recipient. And yet, this dynamic between "organizer" and "organized" was not lost on SNCC workers. In fact, many were openly critical of it. As one worker complained, there were "[t]oo damn many nursery schools, and milk programs," while someone else wondered sarcastically: are "we are a social service agency or a band of revolutionaries[?]" [72]

The larger political context of 1964 aggravated these tensions. SNCC's Freedom Summer had been geared toward a massive voter registration campaign connected with the recently formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). In August, after months of intense on-

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[69] Viki and Martin Nicolaus, Viki and Martin to Dear ____, December 9, 1964.Martin and Viki Nicolaus Papers, SHSW.

[70] Francesca Polletta "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 278.

[71] Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries,* 422.

[72] Barbara Schwartzbaum, "Hattiesburg Report from Barbara Schwartzbaum," November 1964, SNCC Papers (microfilm), Reel 66, frame 1270; Dick Kelley, "November 28—Dick Kelley," 1964. Samuel Walker Papers, SHSW.

the-ground preparation, many SNCC workers accompanied a slate of MFDP delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Their purpose was to unseat the white supremacist delegation of Mississippi's Democratic Party and replace them with the group that more accurately represented the political interests of Mississippi's African American population. The results were devastating for SNCC and the MFDP. Their purported allies in the federal government and the civil rights mainstream betrayed the spirit of the MFDP delegation, refusing to unseat the white slate and offering a compromise of only two seats to the MFDP. In the wake of this defeat, SNCC workers faced a looming struggle over political identity. Their perceptions of themselves as revolutionaries came into crisis with the nature of their organizing efforts within a liberal framework. Rather than responding to those concerns by re-imagining a political and organizational program that could work outside the limits of liberalism and place more power in the hands of local people, those most vocal about shoring up SNCC's internal practices and political vision retreated deeper into liberal reaction.[73]

As SNCC activists' political education expanded after the MFDP defeat, they became even more invested in how local campaigns fit into larger civil rights and national political contexts. Though local control was paramount, SNCC organizers often experienced tension between the interests of the community and the goals that they wanted to see achieved. As such, local decisions or goals that were counter to SNCC organizers' political vision had the potential to create great tension for SNCC activists between their values associated with local empowerment and those related to broader movement goals. A discussion among a handful of volunteers in Holmes County, Mississippi during 1965 demonstrates this. "These federal

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[73] Carson, *In Struggle,* 123-129; Dittmer, *Local People*, 237-422, passim; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 340-352; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 386-396; 285-302; Dittmer, *Local People*, 285-302.

programs [...], Head Start being the best example […], are bad for Mississippi at this stage of the movement in Holmes County," one volunteer claimed. "The people aren't educated enough to stop things from going which are going to go wrong….So there's a certain element in the movement that I see that means having selfish desires to take advantage of federal programs… Before, there was a pure movement. Now, it is a corrupt movement." When questioned about this distinction the volunteer continued:

> What I mean is that before people were going to the court house and doing things in the movement just because it was the thing to do to become a good first class citizen. Now, there's other motives. Getting a deep well. There's things like learning how to fix tractors better. Now all these things require time and energy and that's a decrease in the time they can spend or the energy they can spend working for their freedom—working towards the right to vote, working towards the right to register.[74]

Such distinctions reflected the strange political position civil rights workers often held. In this case, the movement's purity was limited to when local people wanted "freedom" through the vote. Pursuit of local, tangible goals that improved people's daily lives were a sign of corruption. Another worker explained, "…if the people want to have a water pump…they want to have better water, if they want to have kindergartens….they probably won't get the things which they're working for which are the right to be equal."[75] Though SNCC's focus on localized power was a key part of their own sense of themselves as a radical vanguard, local people's apparently more moderate choices undercut SNCC workers' vision of what their agenda was. As Polletta explains, it became clear that "letting the people decide was not yielding the radical programs in was supposed to." This put activists who saw themselves as the "radical cutting edge of the movement in a difficult position." They wondered, "How do we deal with poor people whose

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[74] Bull Sessions, Volunteer Problems, Mileston, Mississippi, KZSU Project South interviews, #421, p. 25.
[75] Ibid, #400, p. 20.

aspirations are justifiably middle class?"[76] According to Polletta, amidst growing uncertainty about SNCC's political and programmatic future after Atlantic City, "SNCC workers became increasingly aggressive in their efforts to push local people to articulate their 'real interests and increasingly critical of each other for failing to draw out in black communities the radical interests they knew were there.'"[77] Challenging local people's perceived moderate politics was another way of provincializing them and setting them apart from SNCC. This not only influenced the ways in which SNCC workers viewed community members, it also negatively impacted their relationship to their own power.

SNCC organizers' reluctance to impose themselves and their views on local people could create a context in which SNCC activists no longer were willing to hold a position or make a decision on anything. Some SNCC workers complained that the obsession with letting local people decide stopped their organizational progress. Questions of authority and power were common, including internal struggles over who gets to make decisions, why, and how. Accusations of "power mongering" and imposing decisions on staff combined with reports that programmatic planning were getting derailed by discussion on "why people don't speak." "'Who decided that?' became a familiar, dreaded rebuttal."[78] By the end of 1964, the right to decide had become a major stumbling block in SNCC meetings. Staff complained in Mississippi, "I asked someone to deal with the two personnel problems…We sat there and nobody talked, and Stokely

[76] Polletta, "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 277; Barbara Schwartzbaum, "Hattiesburg Report from Barbara Schwartzbaum," November 1964, SNCC Papers (microfilm), Reel 66, frame 1270; Dick Kelley, "November 28—Dick Kelley," 1964. Samuel Walker Papers, SHSW.

[77] Nancy and Gene Turvitz, Nancy and Gene Turvitz to Dear Friends, July 4, 1965, SNCC Papers (microfilm), Reel 61, Frames 1092-1094; Polletta, "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice."

[78] Francesca Polletta "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 277.

[Carmichael] said he was the only one there who was willing to make decisions. He said people were afraid someone would ask them who gave them the right to make a decision."[79]

The increasing unwillingness of SNCC workers to own their power, decide, and take the responsibility of deciding initiated a culture of fear where people were shut down for trying to make decisions and simultaneously, people became less willing to be someone who spoke up. Forman identified this tendency as a central aspect of the organization's problem with internalized liberalism. "The liberalism of which I have spoken tended to negate leadership as a valuable factor in an organization," Forman explained, adding, "This tendency was not something new." It stemmed from their early rejection of "the 'great leader' orientation of other civil rights organizations….We believed in community organizing, in the power of the people to develop their own strength and direction." Forman described that such values turned into "a kind of general neurosis in the organization….What had been born as an affirmation became a simplistic negation. Instead of finding ways that people with natural leadership qualities could make their contribution and help to develop leadership qualities in others, this attitude simply said, Curb your leadership."[80]

Forman saw the effects of this in particular on Bob Moses in 1964. "He was made to feel guilty, I think, about his power—and lost sight of the fact that it was a power achieved not through manipulation and tyranny, not out of self-interest, but as a result of performance, good ideas, hard work, tremendous courage, self-sacrifice, and, above all, a spirit of humanity. Bob's attitude was crucial because people looked to him for leadership in Mississippi—and he was no longer providing it." Instead, Moses felt the need to "abdicate his leadership." "From my

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[79] Mississippi Staff Report, quoted in Francesca Polletta "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," 278.
[80] Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries,* 419.

viewpoint, this feeling was in large part produced by the pressure on him of that liberalism, which said, beware of your own leadership, your own power." In order to stave off the corrupting influence of power, they sought to "maintain some kind of purity." Forman argued that "the answer [to the potential for corruption] is not to run away from power, as this group sought to do." Rather than own their critiques, they couched them in the language of group advocacy: "to me their attitude seemed condescending and patronizing," Forman argued. "They never said, 'I am concerned about decision making,' but, 'The staff is concerned about decision making.'" They were "mystifying and rationalizing their own desires in a very paternalistic way." "I felt that everyone must acquire the strength to stand up, present their own ideas, fight for them if necessary, criticize the ideas of others, and recognize their own weaknesses. We all had to overcome the low level of political consciousness and insecurity—the lack of maturity—which caused these problems."[81]

This problem was a "fundamental plague upon all the revolutionary movements in the colonial world," Forman argued. Though middle-class liberals were "on the outside waiting to descend….Our adversaries had only to wait, I thought, for SNCC to destroy its own power by failure to understand its historic role, by a fear of power among some of its members, and by a negation of leadership."[82]

After 1964, SNCC struggled to re-assert an effective organizing program and was stymied by a series of internal rifts around questions of power, structure, and authority. In spite of growing tension around wanting local people to adopt more "radical" politics, SNCC workers' efforts to "let the people decide" had developed into a widespread aversion toward taking ownership of their role in directing the political and programmatic agenda of SNCC's local

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[81] Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries,* 419; 423; 425; 428; 434.
[82] Ibid, 428; 427-428.

community projects. Instead of being willing to own and claim a political agenda, they invisibilized their own power. In this way, SNCC confirmed the stronghold that liberalism still had on the organization, even while they attempted to imagine an alternative.

Conclusion

Though local organizing projects continued amidst this internal struggle, declensionist historical narratives have pointed to this period as the precursor to SNCC's organizational decline. The most promising parts of SNCC's community organizing efforts after 1961 were tied to practices and values that were not firmly rooted within the liberal civil rights framework: Black, locally-led campaigns geared toward community-defined goals. Though these were not necessarily part of a radical political agenda, they were oppositional to the prevailing liberal civil rights framework. They placed African American interests and goals at the center of struggle, even if those interests and goals were not outside the prevailing liberal framework of the movement. The practice of locally-led and defined community organizing opened space for the development of radical programs; however, they were not in themselves the realization of radicalism. Instead, they represented a burgeoning anti-liberal practice within SNCC, even while they were operating within a liberal framework.

SNCC's on the ground experiences also demonstrated the limiting effects of liberalism. Declensionist narratives often point to a rejection of interracialism and nonviolence, and the turn towards rhetoric rather than programs to signal the shift in SNCC from its heroic beginnings to its maleficent decline. Instead, this chapter suggests that the internalized hierarchies of power, which Forman called internalized liberalism, operated in tension with the best parts of SNCC's organizing tradition from the beginning. They limited the ability of SNCC to follow the on-the-

ground lessons they were learning as organizers that were directing them towards a more liberatory vision of change.

CHAPTER FOUR:
BLACK POWER AND THE MARCH AGAINST FEAR

On June 5, 1966, James Meredith set out across the state of Mississippi from Memphis, Tennessee to begin his "March Against Fear." Meredith, who gained national attention in 1962 when he became the first African American admitted to the University of Mississippi, initiated the "March Against Fear" as a solitary protest in support of African American voting rights and to challenge the notion that African Americans in Mississippi had to live and travel in fear of white racism and violence. His plan was to walk for 220 miles from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi, drawing media attention and offering a symbol of hope to Black people across the US South. The protest did not go as planned. On the second day of his march, having crossed only fourteen miles into Mississippi, Meredith was shot three times by a white assailant near Hernando, Mississippi. This shooting transformed Meredith's solitary march into a mass action. Though initially Meredith's march had received little interest from national civil rights organizations (nor had Meredith had much interest in their participation), this changed once Meredith was shot. In short order, leaders from the most prominent national civil rights organizations convened at Meredith's hospital bed in Memphis and decided to continue the march in his honor. Nearly 25 people restarted the march at the location where Meredith had been shot. Among the most prominent national civil rights leaders were Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Reverend James Lawson, Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael. Over the course of the next weeks, the group would expand to hundreds and, by the end, thousands of marchers. By Sunday, June 26, over 15,000 people walked the final eight-mile leg of the march into Jackson, including Meredith, who at that

point was well enough to rejoin them. What began as a solitary protest became the largest civil rights march in Mississippi.[1]

While Meredith's March Against Fear was an important moment of protest and solidarity in the Black freedom struggle, it has become memorialized in historical memory as something else: it was the context for Stokely Carmichael's most famous "Black Power" speech. On the evening of June 16, 1966, Carmichael ignited an historic pandemonium with his shouts and the crowd's response of "Black Power" during an evening speech in Greenwood, Mississippi. Though this was not the first time Carmichael and other SNCC leaders had used the term "Black Power" in their organizing efforts throughout the South, national media coverage of the March Against Fear gave this particular speech greater significance. Seemingly overnight, "Black Power" became a national symbol, evoking panic and fear in the mainstream as media, politicians, and moderate civil rights leaders scrambled to define and understand it.

The significance of this speech in the dominant historical narrative of the Black freedom struggle of the 1960s is hard to overstate. It has been positioned as *the* moment of rupture,

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[1] For accounts of the March Against Fear see: John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 389-407; Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990), 160-169; Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 501-514; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 207-211; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 473-489; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 470-495; Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185-188; Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990)*, 283-295*. For a recent monograph-length narrative history of the march see Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2014). See also: "Mississippi Story," *New York Times*, June 12, 1966, 207.

ushering in the transition out of the "good" civil rights movement, and into its destructive, radical foil: Black Power. In this narrative a nonviolent, integration-oriented civil rights movement that was steadily progressing toward equality for African Americans was devastated by the angry, disruptive call for "Black Power" that originated with Carmichael's speech in Greenwood, 1966. This perpetuated the violent, separatist, and racist uprisings of angry Blacks, which stunted the potential and delayed the progress that civil rights liberalism was poised to achieve. Though historical scholarship on the Black freedom struggle has expanded tremendously in the past few decades, offering nuances and alternatives to this dominant understanding; and though "Black Power" has resurged as a sometimes celebrated, though often misunderstood, symbol in popular culture; this traditional interpretation continues to dominate popular and mainstream historical narratives of the civil rights movement and its legacy.[2]

The March Against Fear, and the initial mainstream response to Black Power in 1966, occurred in a broader context of liberal anxiety about the fate of the civil rights liberal alliance. This anxiety centered heavily on SNCC, whose relationship to their so-called liberal allies had taken a turn in early 1966 when they began to publicly question the federal government as an ally in the Black freedom struggle. SNCC made a series of public statements that openly broke ranks with the federal government, first condemning the war in Vietnam and then boycotting the White House Conference on Civil Rights. At the same time, SNCC went through a series of internal organizational changes that were covered in mainstream media. These developments openly demonstrated a new vision of the Black freedom struggle in SNCC that no longer centered the interests of their former liberal allies.

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[2] For examples of this traditional narrative, see: Alan J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1989).

Against this backdrop, the March Against Fear symbolized a new direction in SNCC as well as the potential for a new direction in the movement more broadly. When civil rights leaders converged at James Meredith's bedside in Memphis, they debated a series of questions about the march itself that reflected many of the central threads that seemed to be at the heart of what was unraveling in the civil rights liberal alliance: what would be the role of whites and liberal allies? What did it mean for the march to be nonviolent? Was the goal of the march to persuade federal action or was it to expand the political consciousness of Black people in Mississippi? These questions became primary sites of contention among civil rights leaders and ultimately resulted in a split among them.

The march itself reflected the new Black-led emphasis in SNCC and the potential for those themes to be meaningful in the movement more broadly. The march, and in particular the call for Black Power, had psychological and political effects on African Americans who participated. This included the march leaders themselves. The media and television coverage of Carmichael's speech exposed the power of Black-centered organizing to the nation. The response among some of the most committed civil rights liberals and mainstream media demonstrated just how threatening this was. The success of the march signaled the possibility that change was afoot. It demonstrated the possibility that Black unity could manifest in the movement among civil rights leaders and Black people outside of the frame of the civil rights liberal alliance.

In this political context, the massive attack on SNCC and Black Power that emerged after the March Against Fear made sense. Amidst the unity and power displayed during the march and through the slogan Black Power, the term itself appeared open to interpretation. This perceived ambiguity was the foot in the door for those invested in preserving the centrality of white liberals

in the civil rights movement. The initial responses to Black Power from mainstream media, civil rights moderates, and others in the civil rights liberal alliance were strategic responses to the symbolic meaning of the march and the broader context of SNCC's public rejection of liberal allies. In the wake of these changes, interpretations of Black Power became the primary way for the civil rights liberal alliance to reassert its primacy in the Black freedom struggle.

SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1964

Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP from 1955 to 1977, claimed in his autobiography: "If there was a single turning point [in the movement], it probably came about the time James Meredith took up his walking stick and struck off down Highway 50 for Jackson, Mississippi, marching against Jim Crow and fear."[3] Though Wilkins' perspective represents a prevailing interpretation, SNCC activists saw it differently. SNCC Program Secretary Cleveland Sellers located the defining moment in the movement two years earlier with the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) bid for congressional seating at the Democratic National Convention in August 1964. As Sellers recalled, "The national Democratic party's rejection of the MFDP at the 1964 convention was to the civil rights movement what the Civil War was to American history: afterward, things could never be the same."[4] What lies underneath these competing narratives about a moment of rupture in the civil rights movement is a fuller understanding of the relationship between Black freedom and the civil rights liberal

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[3] Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (1982; repr., Da Capo Press, 1994), 315.

[4] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1973), 111.

alliance. By targeting these different moments, Wilkins and Sellers reflect two very different visions of that relationship.

For Wilkins, the moment of rupture is linked to another important moment in the year prior to the March Against Fear. In spring and summer 1965, he explained, "the civil rights movement seemed to be at the very apex of its power." Not coincidentally, this apex of power was also the apex of closeness in the relationship between the NAACP and the federal government. Wilkins recalled a phone call from President Johnson in anticipation of the president's famous Howard University commencement speech in 1965 to illustrate this familiarity, and the commitment of the federal government to the cause of civil rights. Johnson told Wilkins, he was "ready for an all-fronts assault on the problems of race." Being so moved by the President's words, Wilkins said:

> I was astonished by his fervor and by his daring. He called the race crisis a "seamless web," he acknowledged the damage that had been done to the Negro family over the centuries, and he argued that it would not be enough to open the door of opportunity to Negroes. After three hundred years of slavery, then enforced second-class citizenship, he believed that the victims had to be helped through the door and on their way. No President before had ever been so enlightened or bold in facing these truths. I came away from the conversations I had with LBJ feeling that he was not only with us but *often ahead of us*.[5]

At the same moment that Wilkins positioned Johnson as *leading* the struggle for Black freedom, SNCC was coming to a radically different conclusion in the wake of a very different experience with the federal government.

When SNCC formed in 1960, they were quickly established as the student wing of the civil rights liberal alliance. Though SNCC's position within the liberal civil rights framework was always complicated, over the course of the next six years, SNCC's disenchantment with the alliance deepened. Instead of increased political and economic opportunities for African

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[5] Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast,* 311. Emphasis added.

Americans in the rural South, SNCC's efforts at collaboration with liberal allies seemed to result in continual disappointment and frustration. Promises of federal protection for civil rights efforts had more often than not proved false as SNCC workers and local African Americans faced daily terror in their efforts to challenge Jim Crow, secure voting rights, and increase Black political participation. Some Black SNCC workers experienced increasing tension with their white allies during SNCC's "Freedom Summer" campaign in 1964, when hundreds of northern college students, mostly white and middle class, came to Mississippi to help with their voter registration and education campaigns. According to historian Clayborne Carson, "The steady increase in the proportion of whites on the staff during 1963 and 1964 concerned many who doubted whether local black leadership could develop in the presence of a large number of whites."[6]

That same summer, SNCC activists felt betrayed once again by their liberal allies in government and the civil rights establishment. SNCC had been working tirelessly with other civil rights organizations and local Black communities to establish an alternative to the white-dominated, historically racist Democratic Party in Mississippi. For months they had been organizing to establish a democratic, anti-racist, and inclusive Democratic Party in Mississippi: the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). In August the MFDP attempted to seat 68 delegates at the national Democratic convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Seeking to replace the all-white group of Democratic delegates whose political power in Mississippi was supported by long-standing racism and white supremacy, the MFDP believed their careful legal and political planning would make them successful. "[T]he MFDP was open to all Mississippi residents, had followed Mississippi rules regarding political party operations, and was committed to the election of Johnson," historian Clayborne Carson explains. This was in contrast to

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[6] Carson, *In Struggle,* 144.

Mississippi's all-white party, which had excluded black participation in the political process and was not only opposed to much of Johnson's domestic agenda, but was also in some instances actively supporting his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater. In this way, even beyond the morality of seating a delegation that was actually representative of Mississippi's population, SNCC and the MFDP imagined their bid to be politically persuasive.[7]

However, this was not the case. Johnson was unwilling to threaten his southern white support and instead of embracing the MFDP's pro-Johnson democratic bid, he responded by ramping up FBI surveillance of SNCC and the MFDP. Impending vice-presidential candidate Hubert H. Humphrey became the leader of the White House response to the MFDP challenge, which the MFDP later characterized as "the most massive pressure." It began with compromise proposals, one of which was to offer the MFDP delegates access to the convention without granting them actual votes. Given the exclusionary history of voting practices in Mississippi, it is not surprising that the MFDP refused. The result was a series of political maneuvers that included political threats to the MFDP supporters on the Credentials Committee. The final compromise offered was two "at-large" seats specifically designated for two of the most politically legible delegates in the group: Mississippi's head of the NAACP Aaron Henry and white chaplain at Jackson's Tougaloo College, Edwin King.[8]

The choice of King and Henry was significant. As Bob Moses later explained, the MFDP challenge was not only a challenge on the "obvious racial grounds" but was also about pushing

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[7] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 123; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 237-422, passim; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 340-352.

[8] Carson, 123-129; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; repr., Washington DC: Open Hand, 1985), 386-396; Dittmer, *Local People*, 285-302.

the Democratic party to "recognize the existence of a whole group of people": poor people and sharecroppers, who were not included in the party's middle-class oriented base. SNCC staffer, MFDP delegate, and former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer demonstrated this challenge when she addressed the convention's Credentials Committee. According to historian John Dittmer, Hamer's personal testimony was so moving she even "overshadowed" comments made the same evening by Martin Luther King, Jr. Hamer spoke about her life and her personal experiences with racial injustice in Mississippi. She told of being evicted from her home and losing her job simply because she registered to vote. She described being severely beaten in a Winona, Mississippi jail after being arrested for attending a civil rights training workshop. These comments were "high drama," Dittmer said, and in response the President "hurriedly called a press conference," which forced the networks to cut away in the middle of her statement. Recognizing the manipulation, networks aired her full testimony later that evening, including her concluding remarks: "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"[9]

Though Hamer's remarks elicited swarms of support, Humphrey decried the idea that people like Hamer would become part of the official delegation. "The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak from the floor of the convention," he said bitterly, illustrating the depth of the challenge the MFDP faced. In spite of such derision, civil rights moderates, including Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bayard Rustin, were steadfast in their loyalty to the White House: they pushed for the delegation to take the two seat compromise. The ensuing debate within the MFDP was lengthy and intense. People on both sides had strong

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[9] Dittmer, *Local People*, 288.

opinions: was it better to accept compromise now in order to maintain political allies in the Democratic Party for the future, as the perspectives of Rustin, King, and Wilkins suggested? Or did such compromise fundamentally undermine the principle that it was unacceptable for Mississippi's white supremacist delegation to represent the state's majority African American population when there was a slate of more representative and democratically elected delegates right there? Ultimately, the latter won out and the MFDP rejected the compromise. As Hamer famously explained, "we didn't come all this way for no two seats!"[10]

While the MFDP's decision was primarily on principled grounds, it was not entirely devoid of strategic considerations. When they rejected the compromise, they planned to go forward with a roll call vote on the floor and believed they had enough support from sitting delegates at the convention to win. They were not prepared for the politics that ensued. Hubert H. Humphrey led the campaign to shut it down and, through serious political and personal maneuverings, Humphrey pressured the liberal politicians who had previously allied themselves with the MFDP to change course. One by one liberal delegates fell in line with White House interests and the MFDP bid for representation in the Democratic Party failed.[11]

The events at the 1964 convention were symbolically meaningful and politically awakening for SNCC. The failure of the MFPD bid for representation pushed on a door that almost no one who benefited from the existing power structure wanted to open: it forced an explicit choice for liberal allies between bolstering their own political power and expanding African American access to full citizenship rights. The results were devastating for many in SNCC, who had spent countless hours, sleepless nights, and long days organizing Black

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[10] Carson, 123-129; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 386-396; Dittmer, *Local People*, 285-302; Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 78-83.
[11] Carson, *In Struggle, 126*-127.

Mississippians to believe that the MFDP could be politically significant. While Wilkins and others plowed ahead in the pocket of the federal government, nothing was the same for leaders in SNCC. Instead of drawing closer to Johnson through the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, as Wilkins' NAACP had done, SNCC only grew increasingly disillusioned. Rather than a testament to the White House's commitment to civil rights, SNCC saw the passage of national civil rights legislation in relationship to the defeat of the MFDP as a sign of contradiction. Their own experiences showed them that efforts to support civil rights only happened on their "allies" terms. Rather than assuage their concerns about federal investment in Black freedom, this legislation seemed too little, too late. Indeed, Wilkins' "apex" of the civil rights movement came on the heels of SNCC's nadir. These narrative differences are telling.

For Wilkins and the civil rights liberal establishment, Carmichael's "Black Power" speech during the 1966 March Against Fear was a turning point because it represented the moment that SNCC abandoned the civil rights movement. For Sellers, the story looked different. In his estimation, SNCC had finally recognized the truth about their purported "allies" in Atlantic City. As SNCC activist Julian Bond summarized years later, "We did not abandon liberalism; liberals abandoned us."[12]

SNCC and the Civil Rights Liberal Alliance, 1966: Statement Against the War in Vietnam

As Bond's comments indicate, between 1964 and the beginning of 1966, SNCC's relationship with the federal government and other liberal allies in the struggle for Black freedom had taken new shape. By the beginning of 1966, SNCC had developed a new public stance

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[12] Julian Bond, "The Politics of Civil Rights History," in Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, eds., *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 8-9.

toward its former allies in the federal government and the liberal civil rights establishment. This became clear on January 6 1966 when SNCC solidified its open critique of the federal government by becoming the first mainstream civil rights organization to publicly state its opposition to U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam. Mainstream politicians, right-wing organizations, liberal allies and civil rights moderates claimed that civil rights organizations had no business involving themselves in foreign policy. However, SNCC saw a direct relationship between the war and their struggle. Bob Moses had developed connections between SNCC and antiwar activists in the peace movement during summer 1965 as part of the Committee of Unrepresented People, an ad hoc organization made up of representatives from various political groups. At the end of 1965, SNCC had decided to explicitly condemn the war. "Mississippi and Vietnam…are very much alike," SNCC's Courtland Cox argued in a December 1965 staff meeting. "Think about the problems of Mississippi's poor, disenfranchised peasants; big business is making a killing in both places." Not only did Cox draw parallels between the context of Mississippi and Vietnam, he also saw SNCC in relationship too: "…consider the similarities between Vietnam's National Liberation Front and SNCC. They ought to be very much alike!" Cox's arguments demonstrated that SNCC was beginning to imagine themselves as part of a broader, global struggle for freedom. The links he drew between SNCC and the NLF also illustrated SNCC's internal self-perception at the time: they saw themselves as comparable to a group engaged in armed revolution against the United States.[13]

Though there was some dissention within SNCC about their relationship to the war, things changed on January 4, 1966 when Sammy Younge, Jr., a SNCC worker and navy veteran,

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[13] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; repr., Washington DC: Open Hand, 1985), 444-446; Courtland Cox, quoted in Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 149; Carson, *In Struggle,* 183-190.

was murdered by a gas station attendant for using a "whites only" restroom in Tuskegee, Alabama. Younge's murder devastated SNCC. They issued a press release the following day with a statement from SNCC's chairman John Lewis, which called for federal marshals with "the power to make on-the-spot arrests, in order to protect not just the civil rights, but the lives and limbs of the Negro people and civil rights workers of Alabama." Lewis' statement pointed to the hypocrisy of federal intervention to that point. Earlier the same day of the murder, SNCC requested federal intervention after Younge had reported that a Macon County registrar told his co-worker Jimmy Rogers, "I'm tired of fooling around with you, I'm going to spill your guts all over the floor." SNCC contacted the FBI and Justice Department for federal intervention and, as the press release stated, after listening to their report an FBI agent told them "You've done your duty. We'll take care of it." Hours later, Younge was murdered. Demonstrating the public shift in SNCC rhetoric, Lewis said:

> If the federal government cannot provide protection for people seeking civil rights guaranteed by the constitution, then people will have no protection but themselves. We find it increasingly difficult to ask the people of the Black Belt to remain nonviolent. We have asked the president for federal marshals for over three years. If our plea is not answered, we have no choice.[14]

Younge's murder provided the impetus for SNCC to release its statement against the war two day later, which called the U.S. government "deceptive in its claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for the freedom of colored people in other countries as the Dominican Republic, the Congo, South Africa, Rhodesia, and in the United States itself." The statement argued that "our country's cry of 'preserve freedom in the world' is a hypocritical mask, behind which it squashes liberation movements which are not bound, and refuse to be bound, by the expediencies of United States cold war policies." Their years of organizing work in the U.S., the statement

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[14] Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, "Murdered: Sammy Younge," News Release, January 4, 1966.

claimed, "ha[ve] taught us that the United States government has never guaranteed the freedom of oppressed citizens, and is not yet truly determined to end the rule of terror and oppression within its own borders." SNCC too had been "victims of violence and confinement executed by United States governmental officials," the statement claimed. "The murder of [Sammy Younge] is no different than the murder of peasants in Vietnam, for both Young and the Vietnamese sought, and are seeking, to secure the rights guaranteed them by law. In each case, the United States government bears a great part of the responsibility for these deaths." Their statement offered sympathy and support for "the men in this country who are unwilling to respond to a military draft which would compel them to contribute their lives to United States aggression in Vietnam." Challenging the notion that "responsibility to freedom is equated with the responsibility to lend oneself to military aggression," SNCC encouraged "all Americans" to "work in the civil rights movement and with other human relations organizations" as "a valid alternative to the draft…knowing full well that it may cost them their lives—as painfully as in Vietnam."[15] SNCC's statement drew explicit connections between their own struggle and events in Vietnam as shared struggles for liberation, putting responsibility directly on the federal government and calling for draft resistors to join the Black freedom struggle in the United States.

The response to SNCC's statement was fierce. "Our support among liberals was sharply curtailed," James Forman recalled. Cleveland Sellers said, "SNCC was inundated with a storm of criticism….Several major contributors notified us by telegram and telephone that they would no longer support the organization." "But," concluded Forman, "we continued down a revolutionary path."[16]

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[15] Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, "Statement on Vietnam," January 6, 1966.
[16] Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 446; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 150.

SNCC and the Civil Rights Liberal Alliance, 1966: The Black Power Program

SNCC's "revolutionary path" took new form in spring 1966. SNCC had already been the subject of political scrutiny and media attention for some time but, after their January statement against the war, this intensified, reaching new heights during May 1966. SNCC's self-conscious efforts to separate their visions of freedom from a reliance on the federal government and liberal allies included the pursuit of organizing programs that would break from their previous dependence on federal protection and media publicity in order to foster liberal outrage at white southern retaliatory violence. Though the realization of these goals were incomplete, SNCC made great strides toward them through the development of a new organizing model in Lowndes County, Alabama.

SNCC had established an organizing project in Lowndes County, Alabama in March 1965. Headed by Stokely Carmichael, this project had helped establish a Black political party in the county that was independent from either the Democratic or Republican parties. This independent Black third party was called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). Within SNCC it signaled the next step in local political organizing after their efforts to participate in the Democratic Party through the MFDP had been squashed at Atlantic City in 1964. The LCFO held its first nominating convention on May 3, 1966 where nearly one thousand Black residents of Lowndes County participated. The successful turnout for this convention in Lowndes County solidified a new faith within SNCC that they could start building Black independent political institutions in other projects throughout the nation. SNCC's staff retreat in Kingston Springs, Tennessee came on the heels of the LCFO nominating convention and this recent success became the programmatic basis for a new Black-centered organizing approach within SNCC. Program Secretary Cleveland Sellers explained, "Everyone present seemed to

believe that the tactics used to organize the Lowndes County Freedom Organization were what we had been searching for since Atlantic City." According to historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries, SNCC developed three major policy decisions at Kingston Springs: independent third parties would become their central organizing goal; they would begin to promote Black consciousness; and they would limit organizing in Black communities to Black workers.[17]

The Kingston Springs meeting was subject to particular media scrutiny not only for SNCC's new Black-centered political organizing program, but also because it was at this meeting that Carmichael was elected to the position of chairman. Media highlighted a controversial middle-of-the-night election in which he replaced John Lewis, the organization's longstanding chairman who symbolized SNCC's position within the liberal civil rights establishment. Media responses to this change in leadership and characterizations of Carmichael were often alarmist and extreme. Historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries argues that while this change from Lewis to Carmichael was often characterized as a "coup by a radical fringe element," it was more accurately "veteran organizers acting on their belief that it made more sense to have the architect of the Lowndes County organizing program spearhead that program's broader implementation."[18] The *Washington Post*'s Roscoe Drummond called Carmichael a "militant exclusionist," and, reflecting the media's general confusion about Black freedom movement politics, claimed that Carmichael was "intent upon taking SNCC as far to the right as he can." Drummond pointed to SNCC's new response to the federal government, including their opposition to the war in Vietnam and their boycott of the White House Conference on Civil

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[17] Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 155; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 180-182. See also Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 447-456; Carson, *In Struggle,* 200-205; Sellers, *The River of No Return,* 155-159.
[18] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964-1966," *Journal of African American History* 91, No. 2 (Spring 2006), 184.

Rights as evidence of their new political stance. He also drew attention to the Lowndes-modeled organizing program, explaining that they planned to build a "'black power structure' capable of seizing the 'instruments of social change' from the 'white power structure' and controlling them." He characterized this turn as "a kind of 'black nationalism,'" which he described as having "some affinity with the Black Muslims and the late Malcolm X."[19] SNCC had not conceived of Black Power as the international rallying call for Black consciousness and Black-led political participation that it would come to be, but it was a symbol of SNCC's new organizing program, which inspired renewed hope within the organization that their struggle for Black freedom had new legs.

SNCC and the Civil Rights Liberal Alliance, 1966: The White House Conference on Civil Rights

If SNCC was in the process of establishing a local model of Black power organizing, they brought their explicit rejection of white liberal dominated, two-party politics onto a national scale when SNCC openly boycotted the White House Conference on Civil Rights only few weeks before Carmichael's infamous Black Power speech. President Johnson had initiated plans for the conference the previous year in response to the release of the 78-page report to the President from a study group headed by former Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel P. Moynihan. "The Negro Family—The Case for National Action," now known informally as the Moynihan Report, gained national attention as people attempted to make sense of the Watts rebellion that took place in Los Angeles during August 1965.[20] The Moynihan Report, which

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[19] Roscoe Drummond, "Hurting Racial Justice: New SNCC Leadership Undermines Negro Cause With Extremism," *The Washington Post* (May 29, 1966), E7.

[20] See: Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report to the White House, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which effectively concluded that unwed African American mothers

called for national effort to address the "tangle of pathology" in the Black community, was both heralded by white liberals as a much needed explanation for the state of the African American community and criticized by some Black leaders for popularizing a narrative that blamed and pathologized Black communities, and particularly Black women, for the effects of racism and structural inequality.[21] Embracing the logic of the report in full, President Johnson planned the conference around the argument that "we need to give stability to the Negro family, which has been damaged by centuries of slavery and injustice." In a speech at Howard University the previous summer, Johnson claimed that white Americans needed to accept responsibility for the breakdown of the Negro family structure.[22]

Though Johnson believed the conference's focus on the Black family would "help Negro Americans 'move beyond opportunity to achievement' and dissolve remaining barriers that have kept them 'a people apart,'" most civil rights leaders had a different perspective. In November 1965, sixty representatives from a variety of religious and civil rights groups met in New York and adopted a resolution calling for the removal of "family stability" from the conference agenda. The question should be approached instead, the resolution stated, "through an economic and urban analysis and needs in the critical areas of jobs, housing and quality integrated education." Ultimately, the resolution was successful in removing "family stability" from the

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running single parent households were to blame for the perceived lack of political and economic progress in African American communities.
[21] Melissa Chappell argues that while civil rights leaders' positions changed on the Moynihan report, Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young initially supported its perspectives. Each of them had preapproved a draft of President Johnson's Howard University commencement address, which drew heavily on the report. See Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 39.
[22] John Herbers, "Report Focuses on Negro Family: Aid to Replace Matriarchy Asked by Johnson Panel," *New York Times* (August 27, 1965), 13. See also: Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries,* 453-54; Carson, *In Struggle,* 204-205.

agenda, yet SNCC remained unconvinced of the federal government's ability and willingness to support civil rights efforts. While in previous years SNCC had held private skepticism about the federal government, they nonetheless worked with the federal government, usually unsuccessfully, to seek protection and support for African American challenges to white supremacy in the South. By May 1966, in the wake of the betrayal in Atlantic City, weakening support from liberal allies and civil rights leaders, and the murder of Sammy Younge, Jr., SNCC was no longer willing to adopt this approach. In a SNCC statement attributed to Executive Secretary Ruby Doris Robinson in the press, they said, "In the process of exploiting black Americans, white America has tried to shift the responsibility for the degrading position in which blacks now find themselves away from the oppressors and to the oppressed…The White House Conference, especially with its original focus on the Negro family as the main problem with which America must deal, accentuates this process of shifting the burden of the problem."[23]

These comments reflected the mounting tensions in the weeks previous to the March Against Fear, in the buildup to the White House Conference of Civil Rights that was to be held June 1-2, 1966 in Washington D.C. Approximately 2500 delegates were chosen to attend the conference, which, according to the *Times*, included the usual civil rights leaders and government officials but also a wider range of public figures including Mississippi Governor Paul B. Johnson and actor Marlon Brando. The conference also included representatives from "the very poor," whose attendance was funded in part through contributions from private foundations. In addition to inviting "the very poor," the *Times* reported, conference planners had erected large pictures of "debris-littered slums" and "children [with] hungry eyes" in one

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[23] John Herbers, "Johnson's Panel On Rights Urges a Vast Program," *New York Times* (May 25, 1966), 1; John Herbers, "Parley on Negro to Press Security: White House Conference is Likely to Assail U.S. Role," *New York Times* (November 15, 1965), 30; Ruby Doris Robinson, quoted in "Poll Watchers from SNCC to Dixie Elections," *Chicago Daily Defender* (May 26, 1966), 8.

hallway of the Sheraton Park Hotel, where the conference was held, in order "to remind [the conference attendees] of one reason why they are there."[24]

Such gestures confirmed SNCC's contempt for the White House Conference. Though SNCC's former chairman, John Lewis, had attended some of the preliminary council sessions (much to the dismay of most of his compatriots), the organization had otherwise been wholly skeptical of the conference and its purpose. In late May, SNCC announced that rather than participate, they would be boycotting the White House Conference on Civil Rights. According to the *Times*, SNCC chose to boycott because their leaders questioned the Johnson administration's sincerity in "helping the Negro."[25] SNCC's questioning stemmed from a longer history of growing tension with the federal government, and their increasing recognition that the Johnson administration was not the kind of ally for Black freedom that SNCC had once imagined. The statement on the conference issued by SNCC's Central Committee called the conference an "absolutely unnecessary" and "useless endeavor." Reiterating their earlier position on the U.S. in relation to international struggle they said, "We believe that the President has called this conference within the United States at a time when United States prestige internationally is at a low ebb due to our involvement in the Vietnam Civil War, the Dominican Republic, the Congo, South Africa and other parts of the Third World. We cannot be party to attempts by the White House to use black Americans to recoup a loss of prestige internationally." Echoing the programmatic resolutions recently adopted in Kingston Springs, the statement concluded by saying: "We reaffirm our belief that people who suffer must make the decisions about how to change and direct their lives. We therefore call upon all black Americans to begin building

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[24] John Herbers, "CORE Seeks New Agenda for Rights Talks Today," *New York Times* (June 1, 1966), 1.
[25] *Ibid.*

independent political, economic, and cultural institutions that they will control and use as instruments of social change in this country."[26]

Though SNCC was the only national civil rights organization to boycott the conference, CORE demonstrated their own disillusionment with the federal government in their response as well. Like SNCC's John Lewis, CORE's Floyd McKissick had been appointed to the preliminary council charged with developing a broad set of recommendations that would structure the conference. Unlike Lewis, McKissick chose not to attend any of those sessions, claiming that the money for such travel was needed for other organizing projects in CORE. In his absence, the preliminary group had decided unanimously that they would present their framing recommendations at the start of the conference and let the 2,500 conference delegates discuss them, make recommendations in response, but not be allowed to vote. If votes were taken, conference chairman and Chicago railroad executive Ben W. Heineman said, "great parliamentary confusion" would ensue and nothing would be accomplished. On the day before the conference, McKissick announced that he would make a motion to throw out the prepared agenda for the conference and ask that they start from scratch at the conference itself, allowing all 2,500 delegates to be part of the decision making process. His most particular concern was that conference attendees be able to vote on any resolution put before them.[27] McKissick's response to the conference, though different from SNCC's boycott, reflected a shared critique of liberal bureaucracy: CORE and SNCC were invested in direct, participatory democracy rather than representative and bureaucratic structures.

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[26] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Central Committee, "SNCC Statement on White House Conference," May 1966.
[27] Herbers, "CORE Seeks New Agenda for Rights Talks Today."

CORE's internal challenge to the structure of the White House conference complimented SNCC's boycott, demonstrating a political shift away from the liberal, civil rights mainstream that was happening within those national civil rights organizations. Importantly, their turn away from the federal government as an ally in civil rights efforts coincided with their reassertion of Black-led organizing in Mississippi. Only days after the White House Conference on Civil Rights, James Meredith initiated the "March Against Fear." The juxtaposition of these two nationally prominent civil rights events helps us understand why the media spectacle of "Black Power" emerged the way it did. SNCC rejected the federally sponsored civil rights event but embraced the Black-led March Against Fear; this was an articulation of the values underneath SNCC's new approach, symbolized by the "Black Power" slogan.

When the March Against Fear took place, mainstream responses from the federal government, liberal politicians, Civil Rights moderates, and media were all informed by SNCC's recent rejection of the White House conference, their turn towards organizing Black political and economic power bases in Lowndes County, and their statement against the war in Vietnam. In this particular context, "Black Power" became a perfect target to address the threats that SNCC and other changing civil rights organizations posed to the power structure and liberal framework of the civil rights establishment. Understood in this way, the term "Black Power" was in itself a lesser threat than the boycott, SNCC's anti-Vietnam war stance, and their emphasis on Black-led organizing. More than anything, "Black Power" offered a convenient way for members of the civil rights alliance to explain the much larger and more worrisome shifts that were already happening in SNCC.

Movement Tension and Black Unity in the March Against Fear

If the mainstream response to "Black Power" was more accurately about the growing threat that SNCC posed to the liberal establishment, which had been developing over the course of many months, and if SNCC had already been using the term "Black Power" for some time, the question remains why Carmichael's speech in Greenwood during the March Against Fear became the particular focus in media and political discourse. Why that speech and not another moment? The answer, in large part, is because of publicity, symbolism, and timing. Meredith's March Against Fear was the most nationally publicized Civil Rights event since the Alabama march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. By June 1966, however, evidence of a shift in the movement was clear. The March Against Fear illustrated both the tensions that had developed within the civil rights mainstream, and, at the same time, the unity that still existed. The march itself also symbolized a potential new direction in the movement: it was Black-controlled, locally focused, and headlined by some of the most unpredictable leaders in the civil rights establishment, most notably: King, McKissick, Meredith, and Carmichael. At this moment when heightened public attention was drawn to a movement fraught with tension and in the midst of transformation, "Black Power" became a compelling media target.

The March Against Fear symbolized in itself many of the changes that were taking place in the movement. This contributed to the climate of anxiety surrounding Carmichael's speech. SNCC, for example, approached the march as an attempt to enact its vision of what Black-led organizing might look like. Carmichael and other SNCC leaders saw the march as an opportunity to get their message across to a wider audience. By 1966 SNCC had become astute about the mainstream press and they recognized that the March Against Fear would be a highly publicized action. SNCC saw the march as an opportunity to engage a national audience, since press

coverage of the march would far surpass the press coverage that SNCC's local organizing efforts had received in the previous months.[28]

Though some SNCC's leaders were wary of getting involved in another nationally covered civil rights march, others saw the March Against Fear as an opportunity to put SNCC's approach to organizing on a national stage. They wanted to push for Black-led political campaigns to take a more central role in the movement. Cleveland Sellers recalled, "We knew we were going to have to be supersalesmen to get [SNCC's Central Committee] to allow us to join the march."[29] Part of the Central Committee's hesitation was because of how disappointed they had been in the two large-scale marches that SNCC had participated in previously. SNCC leaders remembered the March on Washington in August 1963, where then SNCC chairman John Lewis was compelled by other civil rights leaders to water down his speech in order to make it more palatable to a broader audience, including the labor organizations and other financial and political supporters of the march. SNCC felt betrayed and became concerned that civil rights efforts on a national level forced them to compromise their values and message.[30]

SNCC responded similarly during the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, where SNCC leaders were less willing to participate because the march failed to represent their values and vision of the movement. SNCC had not wanted to participate in the march as they felt the danger outweighed the benefits given the violent nature of the counties around Selma. SNCC's experience at the March on Washington had suggested that nationally publicized marches were not in line with their organizational goals. Given their commitment to community organizing,

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[28] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution.*
[29] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 161.
[30] Carson, *In Struggle,* 91-95; Hampton and Fayer with Flynn, *Voices of Freedom,* 159-170; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 231-232; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 62-66.

they were skeptical of the march as a movement tactic. Though SNCC chose not to participate as an organization, they offered resources to the marchers and allowed SNCC workers to participate as individuals. Their Chairman, John Lewis, chose to go as he favored the march, having close relations with King and the SCLC. SNCC's fears were realized on "Blood Sunday" when local and state police attacked the mass of two thousand marchers at the Pettus Bridge. Instead of King, John Lewis had led the march alongside Bob Mants, a SNCC organizer in Lowndes County, and the SCLC's Hosea Williams, as King had returned to Atlanta to deliver a sermon. The marchers were severely beaten and bloodied. Lewis's skull had been fractured. SNCC staffers reversed their decision and hurried to offer support in the wake of the violence and help continue the march as planned. However, SNCC found that upon King's return to Selma, he had brokered a deal with the U.S. Justice Department in fear of further violence. King agreed that when the marchers reached the bridge, instead of crossing they would turn around. Though King did not publicize this arrangement, he enacted it, leading the new group of one thousand marchers to the bridge, stopping for a prayer, and then instructing them to turn around. As the marchers retreated, they sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round."[31] The events in Selma had left a bitter taste in the mouths of SNCC activists. Silas Norman, SNCC's field secretary in Selma said, "I felt that we had been betrayed, and I no longer wanted to participate in that."[32]

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[31] Carson, *In Struggle*, 157-162; Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964-1966," *Journal of African American History*; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes,* 43-50; Atlanta SNCC office, "Report on Selma," (7 March 1965), SNCC Papers; Minutes of Alabama staffs of SNCC and SCLC, 10 February 1965, box 7, folder "Staff Meetings, Jan-Mar, 1965," SNCC Papers; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 387.

[32] Silas Norman, quoted in Cheryl Lynn Greenburg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 97. This sense contributed to the inter-

SNCC leaders who supported participation in the March Against Fear argued that this was an opportunity to make it their own, do something new, and do something more reflective of SNCC. These leaders advocated for making the march into an organizing experience: they would talk to local people rather than just march by, and do voter registration along the way. One of their most persuasive arguments was that the march would be taking place in Mississippi, territory that SNCC considered to be its own. SNCC had been organizing in Mississippi for over five years and the march would be going through counties where they were well known, and that they themselves knew well. Many, including Carmichael, had lived, organized, and struggled in those same spaces for years. They knew the terrain, they knew the local politics, and most importantly, they knew the people. After some convincing, the supporters of participation won out and SNCC agreed to send Carmichael, Sellers, and a handful of others to take the lead. Demonstrating the Central Committee's reluctant support for the march, Sellers recalled that their final words were: "We don't want to hear anything more about this march. Don't call us for help!" Unfortunately for the more skeptical members of the Central Committee, they could not anticipate how much more they were going to have to hear about the march. In spite of initial reluctance, for those who were invested in the march, they viewed this as an opportunity to make it their own: it would reflect *their* values and *their* ideas.[33]

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organizational tension between SCLC and SNCC. Interestingly, SNCC's decision to begin organizing in Lowndes County was actually a direct response to these tensions and an unwillingness to challenge SCLC in a turf war out of Selma. See Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes,* 43-50.

[33] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*; Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 161-162.

Tension in the Ranks: Civil Rights Leaders Envision the March

Overcoming internal questions was the least of the challenges that SNCC faced that June. Their vision of an organizing march was not shared by many of the other civil rights leaders who also sought to take up the march in Meredith's place. After visiting James Meredith in the hospital in Memphis, Whitney Young of the Urban League, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Floyd McKissick of CORE, Martin Luther King, Jr. of SCLC, and a handful of SNCC leaders met at the Centenary Methodist Church, where Reverend James Lawson was the pastor, to discuss the logistics of the march. Tensions were apparent from the very start. The makeup of this group was the first point of contention as Young and Wilkins expressed discomfort about the fact that SNCC's chairman Stokely Carmichael was not the group's sole representative. Eventually, Wilkins and Young were willing to continue the meeting when they were assured that despite the group, SNCC would only have one vote.[34]

Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins continued to be SNCC's main adversaries throughout the conversation. Among the most contentious issues at the meeting were SNCC's suggestions to deemphasize white participation, highlight the importance of independent, Black political organizing, and allow the march to include the Deacons for Defense, a black self-defense group from Louisiana who would be armed. Young and Wilkins, instead, advocated for a public statement in support of nonviolence, the exclusion of the Deacons for Defense, and a mass call for whites to join the march. In addition, Wilkins offered a vision for the march that competed with SNCC's organizing focus: to use it as a way to mobilize support for the upcoming 1966 Civil Rights Bill. Tensions continued when SNCC and CORE offered a statement about the march that they had drafted, which they called a "manifesto," and pressured the other leaders to

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[34] Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 160-162; Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, 315-316; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*.

sign. Again, Young and Wilkins were put off. They took issue with the content of the statement, which Wilkins called "a personal attack on President Johnson." But perhaps as important as the content, they also took issue with the fact that they called it a "manifesto," raising unwanted associations with radical politics and specifically, Communism.[35]

Needless to say, the organizations were split: SNCC and CORE on one side, and the NAACP and Urban League on the other. Martin Luther King, as the representative of SCLC, held the deciding vote, a position that was representative of King's role as mediator between the growing rift among these mainstream civil rights leaders. Characteristic of his larger role in this struggle, King's primary concern was maintaining unity within the movement. Though he was personally in favor of an explicit commitment to nonviolence and the inclusion of whites in the march, he was also unwilling to take a stand against Carmichael and the other SNCC representatives. Because of this, the meeting continued deep into the night, which infuriated Young and Wilkins.[36] "Stampeding the crowd, Stokley accused me of selling out the people," Wilkins recalled, "and his SNCC clique shouted to back him up." Things became increasingly contentious, and eventually, without resolution, Wilkins and Young left the meeting. "I refused to sign the manifesto," Wilkins explained, "I got nowhere with my idea of using the march to back the Civil Rights Bill. Finally, in disgust, I left the meeting to catch a 1:10 AM plane home."[37] Clearly, SNCC and CORE's interests clashed significantly with the goals and concerns of the NAACP and Urban League, whose disinterest in Black-led, on-the-ground organizing was

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[35] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 162; Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, 315-316; Gene Roberts, "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March," *New York Times* (June 12, 1966), 1, 32.; On the Deacons for Defense, see: Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
[36] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 162-63.
[37] Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast,* 316.

matched by SNCC's unwillingness to support federal civil rights initiatives. Though they still shared the same general goal of Black freedom, their ideological and strategic visions of what that meant were becoming different enough to make these groups increasingly illegible to one another.[38]

The tensions that emerged among leaders on the eve of the march represented some of the larger political struggles that undergirded the historical moment in the movement. The role of armed self-defense was a particular sticking point, but this was connected to larger concerns within the movement about their relationship to the federal government, including the role of white liberals as allies in the Black freedom struggle. Mainstream news reports demonstrated the visibility of these struggles when in late May and early June the *Times* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported on SNCC's changing approach to organizing, and particularly, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s comments against it. King challenged SNCC's "new endorsement of 'all-black parties for black power', as it was called in the *Courier* or as the *Times* put it, the "'Black Nationalist' stand taken by the new chairman."[39] In the context of the March Against Fear, Carmichael's suggestion to de-emphasize the roles of whites in the march, for example, reflected these larger themes. His concerns grew in part out of some of SNCC's earlier experiences in which financial support from white liberals demanded a certain amount of political "softening." These examples included their October 1960 conference, where SNCC students acquiesced to pressure from labor organizations to remove Bayard Rustin from the list of conference speakers, as well as the March on Washington, when John Lewis was compelled to change the content of his speech at the last minute. These examples, where financial support from white liberal organizations came with

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[38] Gene Roberts, "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March."
[39] Austin C. Wehrwein, "Dr. King Disputes Negro Separatist: Critical of Carmichael, New S.N.C.C. Chairman, Over Black Nationalism Plea," *New York Times* (May 28, 1966), 1, 9; "Dr. King and SNCC Stand," *Pittsburgh Courier* (June 11, 1966), 2A.

complicated and sometimes invisible strings attached, influenced SNCC and other organizations to call those alliances into question.[40]

A front-page article covering the March Against Fear in the *Times* a few days before Carmichael's Greenwood speech further demonstrated the relevance of these questions within the mainstream civil rights movement and their visibility within mainstream media. Entitled "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March," the article claimed that the "philosophical differences" among march participants, which reporter Gene Roberts described as "vast," "center[ed] more than ever before on their relationship to the white man." While most civil rights organizations depended on financial support from white liberals, Roberts explained, some leaders were beginning to note that financial contribution often came with the expectation that contributors would get to have a say in civil rights policy. Even one of Martin Luther King's aides said that despite their dedication, some white organizers "just don't understand the problem." Though King's aide criticized SNCC for "no longer let[ting] whites organize in rural areas," he conceded that even the SCLC was "becoming more selective about the whites we use." Floyd McKissick similarly noted a new challenge in the movement: as white financial supporters grew increasingly concerned with what they saw as "rising anger and racism among Negroes," McKissick found himself "spending much of his time 'holding hands' with white financial supporters."[41]

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[40]John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998)*;* Carson, *In Struggle,* 29, 91-95, 129; Hampton and Fayer with Flynn, *Voices of Freedom,* 159-170; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 231-232; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 62-66.
[41] Gene Roberts, "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March."

Black Unity in the March

The *Times* article, as well as the debates among civil rights leaders on the eve of the march, highlight a number of central challenges that SNCC and other mainstream civil rights organizations were confronting in June 1966. Though the NAACP and Urban League abandoned the march, and despite the air of tension that surrounded them, the March Against Fear also represented a sense of solidarity within the Black freedom struggle. While leaders continued to argue over organizing techniques and political message, and debated the presence of the Deacons for Defense as potential armed protectors for the marchers, photographs also captured a palpable sense of shared purpose, as Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick, and by the end, a healthy James Meredith, stood arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., smiling and marching toward Jackson together. "Dr. King was enjoying himself immensely," Sellers recalled, albeit with a slight tongue in cheek. "For one of the first times in his career as a civil rights leader, he was shoulder to shoulder with the troops." As they walked together over many days, these leaders began to talk about their different views. Sellers remembered King as "easygoing, with a delightful sense of humor." "His mind was open," Sellers recalled, "and we were surprised to find that he was much less conservative than we initially believed." King began to acknowledge that emphasizing Black consciousness "*might* be necessary" and forming independent, black organizations "*might* just work." After the first week, King was "giving speeches at the nightly rallies in favor of blacks' seeking power in those area where they were in the majority."[42]

Media reports confirmed this in the days after Carmichael's speech, claiming that while King had before "avoided use of the term," he told marchers the next day that Black Power was "the ability to make the power structure say 'yes' when it wants to say 'no'." He continued,

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[42] Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 163-164.

saying: "When we get this power, we will try to achieve a society of brotherhood." SCLC's Hosea Williams was even more explicit in his expressions of Black Power: "Get that vote and put black faces in those uniforms…Get that vote and whip those policemen across the head with it." Looking at the sheriff's deputies lined up near the rally he echoed SNCC's recent statement on Vietnam, "If we can die in Vietnam, we can die in Mississippi." Presaging Carmichael's assessment of media response to Black Power over the coming years, Williams turned to the press and said, "I don't think the newsmen can interpret me because they aren't black."[43]

Even the front-page *Times* article on the split among civil rights leaders recognized this sense of unity, when Gene Roberts claimed that in the face of waning white financial support, civil rights groups were developing "a common bond in trying to create a new financial base among Negroes." Though it was clear that the march was a symbol of change and tension within the civil rights establishment, it was still understood to be a productive tension. As Roberts explained, "…the civil rights movement appears to be thriving on the controversy, as it did in Selma, Birmingham and in the days of the sit-ins and freedom rides."[44] Though civil rights leaders did not always agree, and tensions were apparent in the course of the march, they stood in contrast to the clear sense of solidarity among African Americans and movement leaders, which was apparent in the mainstream press. The march was Black-led and Black-centered, and despite some of the tensions, it was also an expression of Black unity in the movement.

Carmichael expressed his excitement about this unity, and SNCC's efforts to transform the march from a mobilizing event to an organizing experience. Throughout the march SNCC workers registered voters, encouraged African Americans to run for elected office, and talked to them about forming independent political parties. "We wouldn't just talk about empowerment,

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[43] Gene Roberts, "Marchers Stage Mississippi Rally," *New York Times* (June 18, 1966), 20.
[44] Gene Roberts, "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March."

about black communities controlling their political destiny, and overcoming fear. We would demonstrate it."[45] The clearest symbol of this was in Grenada, Mississippi where marchers faced an unusual response from local officials: none. Instead of resisting, Grenada authorities agreed to hire six Black teachers to function as deputy registrars and opened the community to nighttime and neighborhood registration while the march passed through town. After two hundred marchers entered the town and headed to the courthouse, locals had more than doubled the size of the crowd. "For a day and a night," historian John Dittmer explained, "Grenada became an open city." In the course of two days, 1,300 Black residents were added to the county's list of registered voters. However, just as quickly as this occurred, Governor Paul Johnson claimed that the march had "turned into a voter registration campaign." In response he cut the number of state patrol cars protecting the marchers from twenty to four, and called on local authorities to take over the responsibility. As marchers headed from Grenada to Greenwood, local repression tactics resumed on the eve of Stokely Carmichael's famous "Black Power" speech.[46]

This unity was a source of strength, but also contributed to heightened anxiety. Martin Luther King's participation in the march, for example, exacerbated white liberal anxieties because of his power, political position, and level of widespread support. In this respect Sellers account of King's pleasure on the march was in itself a significant symbolic threat. The idea that King might be in line with the more radical-leaning SNCC and CORE was threatening to civil rights moderates, mainstream media, and white liberal politicians. King's awareness of this fear contributed to the nature of his own critiques of Black Power that would emerge after the march. While media and anxious civil rights moderates zeroed in on the divisions and disillusionment of this moment as a frame for the *tragedy* of "Black Power," *unity* within the Black Freedom

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[45] Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 490.
[46] Dittmer, *Local People*, 395-396.

Movement was just as apparent as its tensions during the March Against Fear, when SNCC's "Black Power" emerged onto the national scene. Though both contemporary media and the historical record overshadowed the significance of the march with their focus on "Black Power," the slogan was just one part of SNCC's larger investment in making the march their own, and using the march to demonstrate their changing approach to Black freedom. Most importantly, for African Americans who were impacted by the march, divisions between movement leaders were of little concern. As Dittmer explained, "For black Mississippians [Black Power] made sense—it was what they had been about since the first voter registration drive in McComb." They were not interested in choosing between Carmichael and King, or SNCC and the SCLC. When the march concluded in Jackson, Mississippi on June 26, 1966, Dittmer commented, "the rally was a display of unity" as "the overwhelming black audience cheered all the speakers."[47]

Conclusion

It is not by chance that in 1966, after a year of internal struggle, and at the same moment that SNCC began to re-establish its footing, the liberal civil rights establishment began to dig at the ground below them. SNCC's emphasis on Black-centered organizing pushed SNCC to more fully separate the means and goals of achieving Black freedom from its entanglements with the civil rights liberal establishment. As SNCC increasingly disentangled their vision of freedom from mainstream liberal interests, they threatened to uncover some of the unspoken systems of privilege that had undergirded the civil rights-liberal alliance.

White liberals in the early 1960s had begun to ally themselves more explicitly with the civil rights movement, which benefited them immensely. By positioning themselves as allies,

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[47] Dittmer, *Local People*, 398, 402.

white liberals were shielded from complicity in the systems of white supremacy that stood in the way of Black freedom. While it was framed through narratives of change and progress, this civil rights-liberal alliance actually worked to maintain the status quo. It reinforced existing hierarchies of power in national politics by positioning white liberal leaders in the federal government at the top, and the "racist", "backwards", conservatives in the southern power structure as their adversary. This alliance allowed white liberals access to narratives of moral superiority that had gained such traction within the civil rights movement in exchange for limited gestures of support for African American civil rights.

When SNCC demonstrated the possibility that Black freedom was no longer contingent on maintaining these existing hierarchies, white liberals risked losing their delicate but highly effective network of supremacy. If the critical gaze was turned upon them, white liberals risked exposing not only their complicity in systems of white supremacy but also the underlying hierarchy within the liberal civil rights alliance, and specifically, the ways in which their interests often took precedence over those of the Black community. If previous narratives of Black freedom positioned southern racism as the opposition and white liberals and the federal government as allies, emerging narratives in SNCC were reimagining the role of liberal allies, recognizing that they, too, were complicit in the systems of white supremacy that stood in the way of Black freedom.

White liberals were the greatest beneficiaries from the civil rights-liberal alliance in the early 1960s: their political and social power grew with only minimal effort toward the goal of Black freedom. The presidential election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 was one of the earliest and most obvious demonstrations of this dynamic. Kennedy's rise to the presidency solidified the federal government as a central figure in the liberal-civil rights alliance. However, it was

Kennedy, and not his African American supporters, who stood to gain the most from this alliance. As it turned out, his election depended directly on the support of African Americans in the voting booth, yet this crucial support did not require legislative policy or executive political action. Instead, Kennedy simply capitalized on a strategic and highly publicized phone call that he made to Coretta Scott King, offering sympathy, not action, in response to the arrest of her husband.[48] Kennedy's election demonstrated a dynamic that would continue to characterize the civil rights-liberal alliance: Black alliance with white liberals worked to the advantage of white liberals.

As Black activists in SNCC and elsewhere in the movement became increasingly disillusioned with the idea that they benefitted from this alliance, the power and supremacy that civil rights liberalism offered white liberals was threatened. When media, politicians, white liberals, and the civil rights establishment targeted "Black Power," it was in defense of their continued power and supremacy permitted by the civil rights-liberal alliance. The actual meaning of "Black Power" was less important than the fact that it was a convenient and vulnerable target to undermine SNCC's larger critiques.

Popular understandings of the civil rights movement often position the spontaneous eruption of "Black Power" in June 1966 as a destructive foil that thwarted the promise of hard-fought civil rights efforts for achieving Black freedom. A closer examination of "Black Power" in relation to SNCC's experiences with liberal allies and the federal government by 1966 expose the fissures in this story. The dominant civil rights narrative was largely a creation of the civil rights liberal mainstream in 1966, and an attempt to paint over the cracks in the civil rights

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[48] On the role of African Americans in Kennedy's election, see: Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 91-96; Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President* (New York: Atheneum, 1960).

liberal alliance that SNCC's experiences and critiques exposed. By 1964, SNCC began to recognize a fundamental incompatibility between Black freedom and white liberalism. Though the programmatic implications of this would not be realized fully within SNCC until later, it was this recognition, rather than the specific meaning of "Black Power," that presented such a threat to the civil rights mainstream. The media consolidation of Black Power into violence, racism, and separatism that followed Carmichael's Greenwood speech was primarily an expression of the liberal civil rights mainstream's attempt to reassert its power in the Black freedom struggle.

Contrary to claims in the media and among civil rights liberals, "Black Power" was not a new concept within SNCC or the Black community in June 1966. Similarly, it was also not a full-blown radical philosophy that had anything to do with racism, separatism, or violence. Carmichael's speech became central to media distortion and the historical narrative because of the context surrounding the March Against Fear. The march occurred in the wake of SNCC's most explicit rejection of the federal government and in the larger context of SNCC's political shift in relation to the role of white liberal allies in the movement after 1964. The march symbolized the de-centering of white liberal interests through on-the-ground organizing and Black centrality. It was a Black-led, Black-focused, nationally publicized event, in which the most prominent Black collaborators in the civil rights liberal alliance were not in control. Though the march ended with national panic about "Black Power," it was also a testament to the possibility of de-centering the interests of white liberals in the movement for Black freedom more permanently. *This* was the threat that SNCC and other advocates of Black-centered organizing posed during the March Against Fear; "Black Power" was simply the red herring.

SNCC's "Black Power" slogan captured national attention at a moment of heightened concern over the Black freedom struggle and its broader implications for race relations in the

United States. Many people expected the historic passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 to usher in a sense of relief or success in the movement. But liberal civil rights efforts had produced little evidence of change in African American lives and Black people still lacked economic opportunities and access to political power. New voices began to question liberal integration and federal legislation as effective avenues toward Black freedom. A highly publicized urban rebellion in Watts, California the previous summer exemplified this shifting terrain. White liberals responded to critiques of liberal integration with fear and frustration. African Americans seemed angry instead of appeased, which ignited new racist questions about African American political "fitness", and contributed to a general climate of fear and anxiety about race in the U.S. Amidst this, Black leaders, politicians, mainstream media, and the general public were all trying to make sense of "the Movement" and what it meant. It was in this context that a national audience turned its attention to SNCC's "Black Power" slogan in June 1966.[49]

As a symbol of Black consciousness and political power, Black Power resonated with Black audiences politically and psychologically. In this way, "Black Power" was a transformative symbol for Black people and important slogan for SNCC. However, it did not have the significance that was portrayed in the mainstream media and reproduced in dominant historical narratives. The term "Black Power" became so important in these venues in part because it made for an easy target: mainstream media and liberal politicians zeroed in on "Black Power" as a way to explain some of the more complicated and more destabilizing transformations that were happening in the Black freedom struggle. They perpetuated a distorted narrative of "Black Power" that preyed on white liberal anxieties by re-directing attention toward

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[49] Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995). Questions of African American "fitness" were central themes in Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report to the White House, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

themes of violence, racism, and separatism. Though these themes characterized "Black Power" inaccurately, this re-direction was nonetheless successful in drawing focus from the larger issues. "Black Power" served as an effective lightning rod by absorbing and diffusing the potential impact from the critiques of liberalism that were amassing within the Black community and within organizations like SNCC while permitting an overly simplistic narrative that could be easily contained and dismissed.

This essay re-centers SNCC's 1966 call to "Black Power" as an important moment of rupture in the Black freedom struggle. It is no coincidence that SNCC's use of the term "Black Power" became so significant at this moment in 1966. It reflected SNCC's public attempt to transition out of a liberal framework, though importantly, not yet into a Black radical one. Evidence of this rejection had been building since 1964. Black-led organizing in Lowndes County, SNCC's boycott of the White House conference, and its increasingly public critique of the War in Vietnam demonstrated a new public face that rejected, rather than hesitantly embraced, efforts from the civil rights liberal alliance. To be sure, SNCC's embrace of Black Power was not exclusively a matter of rejecting national liberal civil rights efforts. Indeed, themes like Black consciousness and self-determination were more central elements of SNCC's emerging vision. However, SNCC's particular public rejection of mainstream liberal politics was the most legible to the civil-rights liberal establishment, and thus the most incendiary.

CHAPTER FIVE:
FRAMING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF BLACK POWER AND SNCC

SNCC's organizational trajectory has become a primary example in mainstream narratives of the Black freedom struggle to tell the story of what happened to the civil rights movement and how it came to be eclipsed by the call for Black Power. Using the framework proposed throughout this dissertation, that the civil rights liberal alliance was a defining and ultimately limiting aspect of the civil rights movement, this chapter examines some of the narratives that have developed about SNCC, civil rights, and Black Power in media and mainstream commentary during the 1960s, as well as in the historiography. This chapter focuses on two different types of narratives: first, it examines various responses to Black Power that emerged in mainstream coverage of SNCC and the Black freedom struggle more broadly during 1966 and 1967. Then, it examines the historiographical narratives from the past few decades about SNCC, Black Power, and particularly, the role of on-the-ground organizing.

I make a series of interrelated arguments. First I argue that the ways in which Black Power and was initially framed in media and mainstream commentary set a standard for now dominant narratives of the civil rights movement and Black Power. I point out distinct emphases in how African American civil rights leaders and white civil rights allies framed Black Power, arguing that those distinctions reveal another way that Black humanity was de-centered from the civil rights movement through the civil rights liberal alliance. Next, I turn toward the historiography. Though initial histories of the Black freedom struggle followed step with the narrative arcs developed in initial responses to Black Power in media, I explore a particular trend in the scholarship around SNCC that focused more directly on what was happening on-the-ground. I argue that a primary way that our historical narratives of SNCC, civil rights, and Black

Power continue to implicitly reinforce the civil rights liberal framework is through uncomplicated engagement with themes of on-the-ground, local organizing as well as liberalism and radicalism. This historiographical analysis seeks to name some of the ways that our current historical work perpetuates the predominance of the civil rights liberal alliance and to call for a more robust engagement with themes of local, on-the-ground organizing as well as with categories of liberalism and radicalism.

Civil Rights Moderates, Press, and the Black Power Narrative

The movement narratives taken up by media in the wake of Carmichael's Black Power speech in 1966 were the basis for the narratives that were initially offered in movement histories of the civil rights movement and emergence of Black power. In them, Black Power was the radical foil that ruined the promise of the civil rights movement. These frequently rehearsed stories encouraged historiographical associations between a "good", moral, disciplined, and peaceful civil rights movement that was primarily southern, rural, integration-oriented, and nonviolent, and the rise of the disruptive, angry, mob-ruled turn toward Black Power, which was northern, urban, violent, racist, and separatist. Like the narrative offered by NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins described in the previous chapter, Stokely Carmichael's speech during the March Against Fear is often positioned as the pivot point between these two phases, emerging against the backdrop of urban unrest that was becoming increasingly legible in the mainstream after the 1965 urban rebellion in Watts, California. Narratives of youthful rage and impatience were targeted at northern urban youth and "radical infiltrators", who were framed as disrupting an otherwise promising movement for African American civil rights.

Historian Peniel E. Joseph has described such understandings of Black Power as the civil rights movement's "evil twin," the enraged enfant terrible that spun the movement into decline. Proponents of this narrative have typically derided Black Power by conflating it with radicalism and violence, anti-white racism, and separatism. Implicit in this is the assumption that each of those individual themes were related to one another and, at the same time, necessarily worthy of derision. With only minor variation, these arguments were articulated most directly by moderate civil rights leaders and white liberal politicians. This initial framing of Black Power in the summer of 1966 has come to dominate popular understandings of Black Power even today.[1]

In the weeks following the March Against Fear, Wilkins gave voice to the defamatory characterization of SNCC and Black Power that would come to dominate mainstream narratives. Though he, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other major civil rights leaders had publicly challenged SNCC and their new Black-centered orientation in the month leading up to the famed march, he was the first major civil rights leader to seriously denounce Black Power in its wake. He did so with ferocity, calling Black Power "the father of hatred and the mother of violence," claiming it was an "open declaration of war" from SNCC and CORE. "It is a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan." "It has to mean 'going it alone'," he said, "it has to mean separatism." "No matter how endlessly they try to explain it," he told delegates at the annual NAACP convention in July, "the term 'black power' means anti-white power." He noted that

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[1] Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of African American History* (December 2009), 752. For some examples of scholarship that takes this approach see: Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: 1984); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1989); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York, 2000).

"some segments of a beleaguered people" were adopting the Black Power slogan in a "quick, uncritical, and highly emotional" fashion. This, he said, "can mean in the end only black death."[2]

The themes that Wilkins emphasized in his comments on Black Power: hatred, violence, anti-white racism, separatism, and an emotional, uncritical, death drive, came to define the term in popular narratives thereafter. Mainstream media quickly followed course. "If 'Black Power' is not a call to racist violence but a move to separatism, then the slogan is more naïve than dangerous," proclaimed *Life*. According to a *New York Times* editorial, Black Power advocates were "romantics and would-be revolutionaries for whom the greatest triumph is lying down in the street in protest of getting arrested by a southern sheriff." The term, editors contended, "clearly…mean[t] Negro nationalism and separatism along racial lines—a hopeless, futile, destructive course expressive merely of a sense of black impotence..."[3]

Drawing on comments from Wilkins and other civil rights moderates, mainstream media began to deliberately frame "Black Power" in terms of these themes. Historian Todd Gitlin, in his analysis of New Left media coverage, explains that what becomes news begins through a process of framing: "selection, emphasis and presentation." In this way, journalists and editors used these themes to strategically choose examples and structure articles. As a result, mainstream media drew on white liberal fears to effectively consolidate a distorted image of Black Power that reduced it to irresponsible radicalism, violence, anti-white racism, and separatism. As media historian Jane Rhodes explains, early reporting "situated black power and black nationalism in

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[2] Roy Wilkins, "Where We Stand," address at the NAACP's 57th annual convention in Los Angeles, CA, July 5, 1966 and *Life*, July 22, 1966, 7; quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 219; Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2014), 251; Sellers, 170; Dittmer, 397; Major Robinson, "Wilkins Holds SNCC, CORE Stands 'War' Declaration," *Pittsburgh Courier* (July 16, 1966), 5A.
[3] " 'Black Power' Must Be Defined," *Life* (July 22, 1966), 4; "The Politics of Frustration," *New York Times* (August 7, 1966), 8.

the national lexicon, and issued a warning to white Americans that a new threat was on the horizon." In her study of the relationship between media and the Black Panther Party, Rhodes argues that once the group "became a recognizable media subject through the frames produced by mass media, the simple invocation of its name or image was sufficient to call up a host of ideas and assumptions about who its members were and what they stood for." This was true for Black Power after 1966 as well. In the absence of an acceptable definition in the mainstream, Black Power served as a media target to explain larger shifts that were happening within SNCC, and within the Black freedom struggle more broadly. Though violence, racism, and separatism did not accurately describe SNCC's conception of Black Power, they *became* Black Power's most important descriptors because they were made to be so in public discourse, through deliberate framing efforts in the mainstream press.[4]

Following Carmichael's speech, SNCC came to view mainstream media's continual misrepresentations of "Black Power" as deliberate and aggressive. "[T]he torrent of attacks…were preemptive strikes," Carmichael later argued. "Disinformation intended, collectively—so it seemed to us, by its volume—to drown out any free or open discussion of the *idea*, the strategy among our people. To *impose* their definition."[5] In this way, mainstream media solidified a *perception* of Black Power that became more important than the reality. This perception had real consequences and lasting effects.

The Civil Rights Liberal Framework in Black and White Responses to Black Power

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[4] Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 6; Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York and London: The New Press, 2007), 6, 61.

[5] Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 527.

While initial mainstream media coverage of Black Power drew significantly on responses from moderate civil rights leaders, it is important to acknowledge a distinction between the analyses generally offered by Black leaders and those of white commentators. In spite of Wilkins scathing words at the NAACP convention, his perspective also reflected a strategic, movement-focused emphasis that was fairly particular to African American civil rights leaders. In these narratives, the unrealized promise of the civil rights movement was attributed to the destructive efforts of arrogant, impatient, and ignorant youth who, in refusing to be strategic, instead made poor choices that got in the way of the otherwise promising, albeit slower, process of freedom. This "new generation was short on history and long on spleen," he said. "Negroes had amply shown how aware they were of their own political power. None of these things was new. The younger people were either ignorant of the long record or they chose to ignore it."[6] Wilkins also reflected the common conflation of Black Power with violence and revolution when he continued:

> The real question, so far as I was concerned, was whether SNCC and Stokely were after a revolution. I had always believed that for American Negroes revolutionary fantasies were suicidal. To oppose revolution did not mean to fear whites; I knew that anyone who was not cautious in leading a one-tenth minority into conflict with an overwhelming majority was a fool. You can face a lion one way when you have real artillery, but if you have a powder puff, you have to handle yourself differently—if you want to keep your people alive. For all Stokely's reckless talk of guns and power back then, I still don't think he could tell the difference between a pistol and a powder puff.[7]

This strategic line of argument was not new. In a 1964 interview with Robert Penn Warren Wilkins explained: "the Negro in this country is a very practical and pragmatic animal...he has never forgotten that he's a ten percent minority numerically, and economically and politically he is a much greater minority than ten percent. So that he does not have the

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[6] Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 314, 316.
[7] Ibid., 317.

power, except the moral power, to mobilize—how many guns, to put it bluntly—how many guns can he get?"[8]

Other less moderate civil rights leaders echoed this strategic emphasis. At an Urban League planning session held in Washington DC a few days after Carmichael's Black Power speech, Edwin C. Berry, executive director of Chicago's Urban League echoed Wilkins' conflation of Black Power with violence and his strategic arguments: "[They] can talk about black power, but that's a juvenile approach," he said. "These boys who want a shooting war are crazy…Even without the morality thing I tell them, 'Count the guns'."[9] Though Martin Luther King, Jr. typically maintained a philosophical and moral allegiance to nonviolence, his comments could also emphasize a strategic, rather than a moral disagreement. For example, a few weeks prior to the March Against Fear, King previewed the numerical argument made by Berry and Wilkins in responding to the SNCC-supported Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), the "Black Panther" party in Alabama. "As a 10 per cent minority in a pluralistic society," he said, "Negroes could not talk 'realistically about going it alone.'" The LCFO "just can't work on a state level," he argued, since African Americans only held the majority in a few counties.[10]

These examples demonstrate how civil rights moderates expressed critiques of Black Power that, while rooted in a fundamental faith in the U.S. American system, were not solely in

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[8] Roy Wilkins, interview with Robert Penn Warren, April 7, 1964 transcript available at the *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Digital archive collection: http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/

[9] Edwin C. Berry, quoted in Richard Corrigan, "Urban League Examines Conscience," *The Washington Post* (June 26, 1966), B4.

[10] Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in Austin C. Wehrwein, "Dr. King Disputes Negro Separatist: Critical of Carmichael, New S.N.C.C. Chairman, Over Black Nationalism Plea," *New York Times* (May 28, 1966), 9. It should be noted that at the time the SCLC was actively organizing Black voters for the Democratic Party in Selma, Alabama, just one county over from Lowndes. King's comments were most certainly derived from this recent history of organizational tension between SNCC and the SCLC in Alabama. See Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*.

defense of that system but instead, in defense of the predominant *strategy* of the civil rights movement. In this way, while white liberal and conservative narratives of Black Power often echoed the critiques launched by civil rights leaders, their relative disinterest in movement strategy made their emphases distinct. While they often had significant strategic and ideological differences with Black Power advocates, African American civil rights moderates, unlike white liberals in media and academia, ultimately shared with the Black Power advocates they opposed a more fundamental investment in achieving Black freedom. What distinguished them was how and what they imagined that freedom to be.

White liberal commentators often built their responses to Black Power on analyses from civil rights moderates. They launched arguments in support of integration and critiqued Black Power for being self-destructive. However, even similar arguments were very different when deployed by whites. Claims that Black Power betrayed the spirit of the movement reflected paternalism more than a legitimate engagement with the strategies and ideologies of the Black freedom struggle.

One of the most frequent dynamics to emerge in white liberal responses was to use the threat of "Black Power" as justification for increased support for integration. In this understanding, integration became a way to stave off the impending destruction that "Black Power" presented. Building on the initial responses from within the Black freedom struggle, some journalists framed Black Power in apocalyptic terms, like in the alarmist opening from *Washington Post* columnist Joseph Alsop: "What will it be like when many, perhaps most, of the great cities of America have become huge Negro ghettos, with no more than a dwindling minority of white residents who have not fled to the dormitory suburbs?" Signaling a line of argumentation that would become increasingly prevalent in white liberal responses, Alsop issued

a panicked call to ramp up integration efforts in order to halt the deleterious effects of Black Power. "'Black power' does not mean the election of Negroes," Alsop wrote, "The kind of 'black power' that can be foreseen in the ghetto-cities of the future will instead mean intensification of race feelings, perpetuation, even deterioration of the ghetto-situation, and hideously mounting tensions between America's white majority and Negro minority. At all costs, then, the aim of integration…must be pursued with greater vigor and by more imaginative measures." This type of response to Black Power, and increased support for integration, reflected a kind of fundamental paternalism on the part of white liberals who believed that white control of Black communities was essential and Black control was necessarily problematic.[11]

Other responses reflected a different kind of paternalism. Betrayal of American liberalism was the primary marker of Black Power's moral failure in these narratives. This perspective was a very explicit assertion of the liberal civil rights framework, in which white liberal allies, rather than Black people, become centered in the struggle for Black freedom. These critiques often try to re-assert white liberals as the appropriate arbiters of Black freedom. James Wechsler of the *New York Post*, for example, "worried that [Black Power advocates] were 'killing the dream.' He continued, 'the cause of Civil Rights was floundering'—'the visions of the freedom movement are imperiled'…'some deeply dedicated…men are setting the stage for the destruction of the noblest cause of our time.'"[12] According to Stokely Carmichael, Weschler's response was typical for many white liberal "allies" of the movement, which reflected a "usual hand-wringing and pious condescension." Framing their concerns about Black Power in a veiled language of altruism, white liberals were able to challenge Black Power while still maintaining

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[11] Joseph Alsop, "Matter of Fact…Integration or Black Power?" *Washington Post* (June 22, 1966), A25.

[12] James Weschler, quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 525.

the appearance of alliance. Their "public distress," Carmichael recalled, was framed as concern about a self-inflicted "irreparabl[e] damage" to the movement and to "our long-suffering people's prospects of 'acceptance.'" Once again, white liberals held Black Power advocates (rather than whites themselves) responsible for any potential backlash. According to Carmichael, such framing assumed that "had it not been for those two misaligned, ill-chosen words, American society would have transformed itself into a thoroughly integrated, multiracial, color-blind utopia."[13]

We Hold This Shoe: White Narratives of Black Power

The consolidation of Black Power into themes of violence, racism, and separatism also opened space for white liberals to center themselves in the Black freedom struggle by drawing links to longstanding northern narratives about southern backwardness. White southern violence, racism, and separatism were common themes of civil rights liberalism that morally justified the expansion of northern liberal power. By framing Black Power along these same lines, it became implicitly associated with the southern racists who they condemned. In effect, white liberals, rather than Black people, became the primary defenders of the Black freedom through the themes of nonviolence, anti-racism, and integration, and, by extension, of American patriotism. It facilitated the potential expansion of white liberal power, economically, socially, and politically, couched in the moral rhetoric of Black freedom.

One explicit example of this link came a year after Carmichael's Black Power speech, in June 1967 when NBC aired a News Special that offered viewers a seemingly needed analysis and explanation of Black Power. Entitled, "After Civil Rights…Black Power," the special turned

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[13] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 525.

to Eugene Patterson, white editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and vice-chairman of the Civil Rights Commission, to provide the nation with expert analysis on Black Power and its significance. When asked to define Black Power, Patterson offered the following: "I think Black Power was pretty much what Dr. King was preaching five years ago," he said, "which is political unity, get the vote, use the vote, to gain your rights, develop pride in self, develop a sense of history, develop a willingness to solve your own problems and stop leaning so much on the white man." Two things are initially noteworthy in Patterson's definition of Black Power: first, it was not negative and second, it did *not* rely on themes of violence, racism, or separatism. It actually echoed many of the themes of Black power offered by SNCC and CORE. However, he also framed Black Power as a list of directives (get the vote, develop pride, stop leaning on the white man…), which betrayed a pathologizing undercurrent. Further, as soon as he offered this more robust, albeit limited, definition, questions about the meaning of Black Power were swept aside in the NBC special for the main topics of discussion: condemning violence and celebrating American democracy. After rather oddly positioning the national symbol of nonviolence, Martin Luther King, as the original voice of Black Power, he then said, "But I think also, that you have to stay within certain bounds…"[14]

Patterson was known as a champion of civil rights and, more recently, for having sent a message to "Negro Extremists" in his weekly columns, warning Black people not to turn to violence the same way that white southerners had. This warning was the central theme of the entire news special. "I've been a little worried about the manifestations of Black Power," Patterson explained, "which indicate that staying within the democratic process is becoming less

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[14] NBC News Special, "After Civil Rights…Black Power," (aired June 11, 1967) [videorecording] http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/51A02205_s01.do

attractive to the Negro." He continued: "I experienced this in the white South where the difficulty of ending segregation, led many whites…outside the democratic process and into violence. I think this led to their self-defeat, I think it always will in this country."[15]

Reflecting a deeply ahistorical and racist liberal logic, Patterson suggested a fundamental equivalency between the experience of Black people in the United States and white southern racists. Both groups, he suggested, moved toward violence instead of using the democratic process, as if both groups had equal access to that democracy. In so doing he equated the Black struggle for freedom in the wake of centuries of slavery, widespread disenfranchisement, and systematic racialized violence, with Ku Klux Klan-style terror aimed at maintaining white supremacy in the South. Patterson continued this flawed logic, claiming that moving away from democracy had constituted the "self-defeat" of white southern racists, and would necessarily be the self-defeat of Black Power advocates as well. Perhaps drawing allusion to the post-Civil War national narrative, the most obvious fallacy here was the claim that white southern racists had somehow been defeated. But not surprisingly, Patterson's logic also reflected the predominant liberal framework of the civil rights movement; he limited the legitimate pursuit of African American freedom to the same "democratic" processes and institutions that had been responsible for centuries of African American enslavement and exploitation.

These themes deepened when Patterson then referenced the infamous bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL that killed four African American girls on September 15, 1963. Patterson had gained national attention when he wrote "A Flower for the Graves" in the *Atlanta Constitution* the day after the bombing, which was read aloud on the CBS

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[15] NBC News Special, "After Civil Rights…Black Power," (aired June 11, 1967) [videorecording]
http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/51A02205_s01.do

evening news with Walter Cronkite. The article began with a description of a weeping mother in the street in front the church, holding a shoe she had found in the debris that belonged to her murdered child. "We hold that shoe with her," Patterson claimed. The article was a rather impassioned condemnation of white southern complacency in the face of systemic racialized discrimination and terror. "Every one of us in the white South" is to blame, he said. "We—who go on electing politicians who heat the kettles of hate…We—who stand aside in imagined rectitude… Let us…match it with the spectacle of shrilling children whose parents and teachers turned them free to spit epithets at small huddles of Negro school children for a week before this Sunday in Birmingham." "May [this] hasten the day when the good South…will rise to this challenge of racial understanding and common humanity…."[16]

Four years later, the NBC news special on Black Power described the central message of his famous editorial much differently. Rather than a challenge to the varied forms of white complicity in southern racism, the editorial's primary message had now become that "all of us who don't condemn violence" are responsible. Wielding the memory of the 1963 Birmingham bombing with disgusting hubris and paternalism, Patterson told viewers: "I would hope that the Negro in America would also remember those days." He continued: "the democratic process, the institutions of this country I think have been sufficient to give a start toward a better break in life for the American Negro and I'm convinced will bring him full equality and justice, ultimately." Here, in a callous reversal, Patterson felt empowered to use one of the most notorious moments of racialized terror against African Americans in recent history in order to instruct Black people to recognize how "sufficient" and promising U.S. institutions and democracy were for the yet unrealized achievement of their "full equality and justice." In the same stroke, Patterson co-opted

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[16] Eugene Patterson, "A Flower for the Graves," *Atlanta Constitution* (September 16, 1963).

the memory of the racist murder of the four little girls and used it to both shame Black people and also endorse U.S. democracy and its institutions. His final comments on the subject were:

> I recognize his reasons for being impatient. I'm not against impatience, I'm not against protest, I'm not against any group in America, certainly the Negro…who has so far to come, and I'm not against this man demanding his rights and working toward them, and bringing pressures to bear for them, but what I'm saying is, that when you carry any group of Americans across the boundary the separates the democratic process from the jungle, or when you threaten to burn a city, or shoot a man, when you threaten violence, either by implication or outright, then I think you are contributing to the defeat of whatever cause, whatever cause, moral or immoral, it is that you are attempting to champion.[17]

Though initially Patterson's interpretation of Black Power was not negative, the news special made it so by framing the discussion of Black Power around the question of violence. In effect, like Wilkins, Berry, and King, Patterson's critique of Black Power became primarily strategic. However, this example demonstrates the ways that such strategic challenges functioned differently in the narratives developed by Black leaders and white liberals. Imbued almost entirely with paternalism and racism, Patterson's concern about the potential use of violence in the Black struggle had nothing to do with effective strategies for liberation, instead it was primarily geared toward celebrating the promise of the American democratic process. Further, he used a narrative of violence to explicitly link white southern racism together with Black Power. The effect was to marginalize Black people from the Black freedom struggle and instead centralize white liberals and their institutions and democratic process as the legitimate avenue for Black freedom. In this way, by de-centering Black people from his analysis, Patterson's treatment of Black Power reinforced the predominance of the civil rights liberal framework.

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[17] NBC News Special, "After Civil Rights…Black Power," (aired June 11, 1967) [videorecording] http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/51A02205_s01.do

Media consolidation of Black Power into violence racism and separatism and SNCC into nihilistic radicalism fed the logics and strategies of repression that targeted Black Power activists and other perceived radicals in full force through state-sponsored terrorism programs such as the FBI's "COINTELPRO."[18] In 1967 the Department of Defense including the Department of Army, US Army Intelligence Command, and the FBI developed a counter-intelligence study on SNCC. The study expressed the same reductionist logic and arbitrary associations that circulated in initial liberal and conservative media analyses. In this framing, SNCC had gone through a "transformation" that was "accelerated…when Stokely Carmichael became national chairman…[and] popularized his slogan, 'Black Power,' which to him meant 'bringing this country to it knees' and using 'any force necessary' to attain Negro goals." "The switch," the report contended, "changed SNCC from the traditional-type civil rights organization to a militant anti-white hate group." Demonstrating an underlying racism and paternalism similar to Patterson, the Department of Defense explained SNCC's "switch" in more detail: "By 1965, SNCC had renounced its policy of non-violence and integration to advocate *political and economic power for the Negro* and to agitate against the United States involvement in Vietnam." That "political and economic power for the Negro" was presented as a marker of SNCC's new militancy without explanation, modification, or caveat demonstrates quite plainly that Black pursuit of political and economic power was inherently unacceptable to the state.[19]

SNCC's activities were also seen primarily in relation to their perceived position on violence. SNCC's earlier voter registration work, for example, was necessarily linked to the

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[18] Robert L. Allen draws links between McCarthy-style anticommunist repression and efforts to suppress sixties and seventies-era Black radicals, arguing that the efforts against Black radicals in the later period were comparably more violent. See: Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (1969).

[19] Department of Defense, "Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (1967)." [emphasis added] http://www.aavw.org/protest/carmichael_sncc_abstract06_full.html

group's status as a nonviolent civil rights organization, as if voter registration activism was only imaginable as an expression of nonviolence. The framing of a "switch" put policies of integration and nonviolence in relation to "political and economic power for the Negro" and opposition to "the United States involvement in Vietnam." While neither of these themes had anything to do with SNCC's strategic or tactical position on integration or nonviolence, the report nevertheless understood them in this way. Rather than justify this perceived connection, the Department of Defense presented them without explanation. Thus, SNCC's investment in Black political and economic power, as well as opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, appeared to depend on them renouncing nonviolence and integration. With no actual connection to the question of violence, these positions were read, simply by association, as an expression of violence and of SNCC's transformation from a "traditional-type civil rights organization to a militant anti-white hate group."[20]

SNCC and Black Power in Historical Narrative

I highlight this initial consolidation of Black Power into themes of violence, racism, and separatism through media and mainstream commentators in order to emphasize the continuities between initial responses from white liberal allies and the historical narratives that our current scholarship engages and produces. Our current narratives are, just as these initial narratives were, part of a historical moment with real political, ideological, and personal consequences. Media narratives, like Patterson's, had both implicit and explicit assumptions about which strategies and visions of Black freedom were legitimate. These were reflected in similar logics of legitimacy employed in the service of state repression during the sixties and seventies, as in Department of

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[20] Department of Defense, "Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (1967)." http://www.aavw.org/protest/carmichael_sncc_abstract06_full.html

Defense report on SNCC in 1967. They were also echoed in popular historical memory of Black Power as scholars matched the efforts of sixties era journalists and politicians to frame the civil rights movement and its "evil twin." Historian Allen J. Matusow, for example, describes "black protest in the 1960s" as moving "from liberal hope to radical disillusionment." Misrepresentations of Black Power emerged from a variety of neoconservative and liberal historical sources in the seventies, eighties, and onward, extending the paternalistic and racist undercurrents within mainstream media and liberal popular responses. As historian Cedric Johnson explains, "These texts merely inscribed in an academic language the fears and reactions to sixties counterculture, expressed decades earlier by the pioneers of the New Right."[21]

The failed Black Power/righteous civil rights dichotomy often emerged in scholarship that was identified in an early historiographical essay by historian Steven F. Lawson as the first wave in civil rights movement historiography.[22] This first wave of scholarship solidified what is now the traditional periodization of the civil rights movement, beginning with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision or the Montgomery Bus Boycott the following year. Top-down, national narratives centered on the heroism of charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and often framed the movement's success in relationship to the efforts of white liberal allies in politics, media, and mainstream institutions.[23]

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[21] Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: 1984), 345; Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), *xxxiii*. Other examples of this Reagan era liberal and neoconservative scholarship include: Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

[22] Steven F. Lawson "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* 96 (April 1991).

[23] Lawson cites works such as: Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York, 1977); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights*

Most of the successive trends in movement scholarship that have emerged within the last three decades are a response to this first wave of scholarship. A second generation sought to remodel the top-down, national-focus in the historiography by turning their attention toward local communities, grassroots organizations, lesser-know leaders, and the experiences of rank-and-file community activists. In this regard, historians Charles Payne and John Dittmer exemplify this locally rooted, community-oriented focus in their respective studies of civil rights organizing in Mississippi. In a similar fashion, historians Clayborne Carson and Wesley C. Hogan challenged prevailing trends by drawing their focus to the internal organizational dynamics within SNCC. Other scholars took a slightly different approach, which Lawson calls the interactive model. These scholars turned their attention to themes of struggle and dialectic within the movement, between local and national, social and political, external and internal, examining them in relationship to one another.[24]

Out of this growth, a more forgiving set of narratives has emerged in the historical discussion of SNCC and Black Power. The detail with which these scholars examine civil rights organizing and SNCC in particular, provide important amendments to the dichotomous civil

Movement, 1942-1968 (New York, 1973); Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedy and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York, 1980). Later historians have added these more recent works into this category: Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: 1984); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, 1989); Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey P. Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, 1994); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York, 2000).

[24] Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dittmer, *Local People*; Carson, *In Struggle*; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Examples of the integrative model: Doug McAdam, *Political Process Model and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, third edition (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).

rights/Black Power narratives that were established after 1966. They provide a more complicated response to those who take up the simple narrative that Wilkins' assessment of the March Against Fear was the divisive moment of the movement. In these narratives, Sellers' watershed moment at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, which was discussed in the previous chapter, becomes much more prominent. Scholarship that has turned inward to the local and organizational levels of analysis complicate our historical understanding of SNCC and its relationship to Black Power by emphasizing the period *between* these two moments of rupture in 1964 and 1966 to explain what happened to SNCC and the movement.

Locally- and internally-focused historical narratives of SNCC attend to questions of rupture, civil rights liberalism, and Black Power by focusing their attention on the period between 1964 and 1966. Disillusionment with liberal allies in the civil rights mainstream and federal government after 1964; internal struggles after Freedom Summer over the role of whites and middle-class northerners; questions of decision-making, authority, and organizational structure; burnout; fatigue; and dissension from the ranks all contribute to the understanding of SNCC's changing relationship to the civil rights movement in these narratives. Rather than a racist, violent, and separatist takeover, Black Power emerges in with much more complexity and nuance. These narratives hold white liberal allies within SNCC and within the broader political sphere much more accountable for contributing to and even creating the complicated set of internal tensions, political disillusionment, and fatigue that developed in the organization. They point out the difficult political position that SNCC activists were in after 1964, and the immensity of the challenge they faced trying to overcome the changing internal and external political landscape. They also explain the emergence of Black Power as a product of SNCC's

experience and political development in ways that challenge narratives of inexperienced, outside radical infiltrators. In general, these narratives are far more forgiving though rarely celebratory.

However, though the closer level of focus within these narratives appears to provide an alternative to the Black Power "evil twin" trajectory, in effect, they tell the same story. While they demonstrate that the emergence of Black Power in SNCC was complicated, these narratives nonetheless frame SNCC's, and the broader grassroots civil rights movement's, organizational decline around it. They did this not just in spite of, but *through* their emphasis on internal transformation. As Carson explains, they were "weakened by internal dissension." Payne elaborates: "Between the fall of 1964 and the spring of 1966, SNCC was[…] in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and recriminations, a deteriorating social climate that would ultimately lead to SNCC members threatening one another with weapons, to members calling the police to settle disputes among themselves, to the members of one faction 'firing' all the members of another faction and being 'fired' by them in turn." As "speechifiers outshouted organizers," Wesley C. Hogan contends, "The rhetorical style loosened within SNCC got in the way of patiently and persistently growing leaders at the grass roots." While individuals would still organize, SNCC as a group was not focused on "working with people at the base." The move from program to rhetoric, from locally-oriented community work to internal divisions and power grabs, from a beloved community to an angry dysfunctional family, from building community with local people to advancing their individualistic pursuits, these became the primary sites of analysis for SNCC's decline. The shorthand was that they had changed, and in doing so they had abandoned their roots.[25]

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[25] Carson, *In Struggle,* 3; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 365-66; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart,* 254.

Abandoning roots became the way that defamatory interpretations of radicalism, violence, racism and separatism became re-centered in the narrative. While the push toward becoming an all-Black organization is explained as a product of SNCC's experiences, it is simultaneously a signal that SNCC had abandoned its earlier roots as an interracial organization. Though the turn away from philosophical and even strategic nonviolence was presented as a rational response to perpetual exposure to violence in combination with limited federal protection, it was nonetheless a sign of SNCC abandoning its early values. As Carson explained, "SNCC hastened its own decline by losing touch with its roots in the deep South." Perhaps the theme in this scholarship that was most clearly a distinction from initial responses to Black Power was in how they presented liberal allies. These scholars presented the limits of the federal government and other white liberal allies very plainly, even justifying SNCC's increasing unwillingness to work with them after Atlantic City. However, none of these narratives fully engaged the implications of this. Instead, the limits of their former liberal allies became the backdrop for analyzing the other ways in which SNCC had abandoned its roots internally.[26]

In this way, abandoning their roots became the primary explanation for SNCC's decline and while pieces of this narrative were presented as more complicated, the conclusion remained the same: interracialism to anti-white racism and separatism, nonviolence to violence, and working within liberalism to its radical rejection together populated the declensionist narrative of civil rights to Black Power in SNCC. "[T]he transition from the Beloved Community to Black Power," Payne claimed, "was accompanied by a jettisoning of some of the moral and social anchors that had helped regulate relationships among activists when SNCC was in its

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[26] Carson, *In Struggle,* 300.

community-organizing phase."[27] Implicitly, they suggested that had the organization maintained its earlier values and programmatic emphases, the movement would not have declined. Though these histories of SNCC were complex and detailed, a far cry from the reductionist characterizations in media and neoconservative interpretations, the emphasis on programmatic decline kept these historians in conversation with movement repressors. Foreshadowing their declensionist narratives, the Department of Defense reported, "In May, 1967, Carmichael relinquished his National Chairman position in SNCC ostensibly to return to Negro problems as a field worker, however, he has remained in the lime-light and has not returned to field work in Washington, D.C., as he indicated at the time of his resignation."[28]

A primary limit of these narratives is their minimal engagement with SNCC after 1966. This oversight is fueled by their declensionist perspective and argument: SNCC was not relevant in the same way after their period of apparent decline, which would therefore not warrant scholarly attention. Further, if SNCC's primary organizational value was their locally-oriented, community-organizing focus, then if these narratives perceived them to have abandoned that focus, this would become the end of the story. With the exception of Carson, most of these historians do not even attempt to engage SNCC in a substantive way after 1966. Wesley C. Hogan's narrative is particularly striking in this regard. Her detailed analysis of SNCC's "golden era" ends rather explicitly at the conference in Waveland in November 1964, with only a few concluding gestures to the rest of SNCC's history. There were "many who tried to deflect quarrels in the name of preserving SNCC's focus on the grass roots in the towns and hamlets of the South," she explained. "After 1965, in every locale except SNCC's cutting-edge outposts in

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[27] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 366.
[28] Department of Defense, "Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (1967)." http://www.aavw.org/protest/carmichael_sncc_abstract06_full.html

Lowndes County, Alabama, all of the [people] working at the base of southern society had found their actions effectively blunted….By the end of 1966 SNCC ceased, in any programmatic sense, to exist."[29]

As Hogan explicitly demonstrates, SNCC's perceived declension in these narratives is often framed as a product of programmatic de-emphasis that developed after 1964, and positioned in relation to the emergence of Black Power. However, this narrative ignores the continual programmatic flux within SNCC, including periods where local projects were numerous and periods when they were less so, between 1961 and 1964. In this sense, there was actually a programmatic continuity within SNCC throughout its organizational life as SNCC continued to emphasize local community projects well into the 1970s. However, what these narratives miss in particular is that Black Power, rather than a signal of decline, was actually a marker of programmatic re-emphasis within the ebb and flow of SNCC's organizing work. As historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries has demonstrated, Black Power was rooted in a new organizing program adopted by SNCC in May 1966 based on their work in Lowndes County, Alabama. Rather than turn away from the organizing tradition, Jeffries illustrates that Black Power was actually the most explicit assertion of a programmatic vision to emerge in three years. The absence of this analysis in declension narratives stems in part from their limited critical engagement with SNCC after 1964.[30]

While SNCC scholars have both implicitly and explicitly critiqued Black Power, they have been less likely to critically engage with SNCC's relationships to liberalism and radicalism. Instead, locally- and internally-focused declensionist narratives have been more likely to

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[29] Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 4.
[30] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

disengage from questions of political orientation, affiliation or ideology. Sometimes this has manifested in very little discussion of SNCC in terms of radicalism, revolution, liberalism, or militancy. But it could also manifest as the opposite. Carson's *In Struggle*, for example, describes SNCC as a radical and militant organization throughout the entire narrative: "At first their radicalism took the form of an insistence that the federal government and its liberal leaders use their power to protect and assist SNCC workers and the southern blacks with whom they worked," he claimed. Later, in a rather odd reversal of standard narratives of radicalism in SNCC, Carson describes that "SNCC staff scattered like seeds in the wind after their radicalism no longer found fertile ground in the southern struggle….Some have continued to affirm SNCC's radical values; others have not." Unlike Matusow or Wilkins, this group of historians does not have an explicit critique of radicalism. In the case of Carson, SNCC's radicalism is celebrated. However, by uncomplicatedly celebrating the presence of radicalism during SNCC's "golden era" within an otherwise critical declensionist narrative, they fail to effectively engage with the concept of radicalism.[31]

In some ways it is not surprising that the histories most invested in the internal dynamics and voices from those within SNCC would take this approach to radicalism. This sense of radicalism was a narrative promoted by people in SNCC as well. As Carson explained about SNCC in 1961, "A measure of the new spirit of militancy among SNCC workers was their use of the term *revolutionary* as a self-description."[32] In a June 1964 staff meeting, SNCC workers discussed the political implications of the upcoming MFDP challenge, framing it as a "radical program." Presaging a line of argumentation that would characterize the pursuit of Black electoral politics during and after the height of the Black Power era, their estimation was that by

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[31] Carson, *In Struggle,* 2, 306.
[32] Ibid., 51.

"trying to gain…leverage within the structure," they had the potential to "change the structure."[33]

SNCC workers were often deeply invested in their perception of themselves and the perception of them in the outside world as the most radical of the civil rights organizations. They believed they were breaking new ground and doing what no one else had done. Though it is not uncommon for organizations to imagine themselves as part of a radical vanguard, this perspective was more significant in understanding the story of SNCC than has been given attention. In part this was because SNCC's self-perception limited their ability to see the multiple ways that they were deeply imbedded in the liberal civil rights framework. Even when they explicitly rejected liberalism in their rhetoric and through their organizational alliances, they failed to recognize the extent to which they were still enmeshed within liberalism.

The relationship between liberalism and radicalism within SNCC was complicated and unclear, even (or perhaps especially) to those within the organization. However, SNCC's longtime Executive Secretary James Forman recognized this. In explaining his desire for SNCC to become a more fully-realized revolutionary organization at the end of 1964 he said:

> This is not to negate the fact that the work SNCC had done was, in its time and place, revolutionary. We were not struggling for the vote as an end in itself, but to attain human dignity. And any struggle for dignity is revolutionary. SNCC was a pacesetter, a vanguard, in the early 1960s and would continue to be one. But it is possible to do revolutionary work in certain situations without being revolutionary. This was what SNCC as a whole had done until then, and we had reached the point where it was necessary to become a revolutionary organization in every sense. I thought SNCC would grow to see that need. But I failed to see clearly enough my own responsibility for sharing my dreams and infusing others with my spirit of organization. I also underestimated the danger of certain contradictions inherent in SNCC.[34]

The effects of this absence of critical engagement with liberalism and radicalism within SNCC has gone under-acknowledged.

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[33] SNCC, Staff Meeting Minutes. June 9-11, 1964. SNCC microfilm. Reel 3, frames 334-338.

[34] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; repr., Washington DC: Open Hand, 1985), 412.

Narratives of Radicalism and Local Organizing in Black Power Scholarship

Black Power scholarship that has emerged in the past two decades has often continued this trend in movement scholarship. While recognizing the contribution of earlier civil rights movement scholars like Carson, Dittmer, and Payne, much of this scholarship also sought to challenge the declensionist tendencies in earlier civil rights movement histories. In their attempt to vindicate Black Power, parts of this scholarship have tended toward uncritically celebratory narratives of the emergence of Black Power in and out of SNCC. As Cedric Johnson aptly notes, "Much of the writing on Black Power that emerged during the late nineties attempts to vindicate sixties radical politics against its various critics and misrepresentations." But, he says, "The neoconservative ideological campaign to bury the memory of sixties black radicalism has had the effect of stalling the development of a critical orientation in the reparative literature on Black Power."[35] In an attempt to counter the massive maligning of Black Power in mainstream narratives, Black Power scholarship tended toward a rather uncritical and celebratory interpretation of Black Power understood in terms of radicalism. Though many Black Power groups did embrace a radical framework, Black Power scholars have fallen into the same trend as Carson of collapsing too much into the category.

Claiming that "[t]he main thrust of Black Power politics was radical in orientation," historian Peniel Joseph explains:

> This is to say that Black Power activists argued that American society needed to be fundamentally altered, rather than reformed. This radicalism was reflected in the politics of a broad range of historical actors and organizations that were black nationalists, Marxists, pan-Africanists, trade unionists, feminists, liberals, or a combination of all or some of these tendencies. Additionally, small strains of black conservatives also were

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[35] Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)*,* xxxiv, xxxv.

attracted to Black Power's call for self-determination and promotion of black business, self-help, and entrepreneurship.[36]

Besides defining the distinction of a radical orientation with two synonyms: "alter" and "reform," Joseph's list of acceptably radical tendencies includes categories that are just as likely to contain elements that are not radical (feminist, trade unionist, black nationalist, etc.). However, the most surprising part of the list is his inclusion of liberals. This betrays a common tendency that has emerged in Black Power literature in which Black Power comes to stand in for radical politics, regardless of what the politics within Black Power are. His addendum with Black conservatives in his definition demonstrates this.

Scholars have aggressively pointed to the pursuit of Black electoral politics and institution building as a defense of Black Power politics against declension claims that Black Power, and SNCC as a particularly good example, failed because of their emphasis on rhetoric and ideology over program. However, in the process they have subsumed the pursuit of Black controlled politics (first outside of the two-party system but later within it) within a fuzzy frame of Black Power radicalism. In this way, similar to Carson's description of SNCC as always radical, these narratives conflate Black Power and radicalism such that the pursuit of Black electoral politics and even certain expressions of Black capitalism can be understood as radical. The fact of Black-centeredness in these narratives has come to stand in for a radical ideology or political program.

In the same vein, other versions of Black Power scholarship have simply removed a dialogue about radical politics from the discussion entirely. In these tendencies, celebrations of Black Power politics become celebrations of Black political participation in U.S. politics,

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[36] Peniel E. Joseph, ed. "Introduction," *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 279n3.

including Black political alliance with white liberals. In the context of SNCC's history, this unearths a painful irony: the notion of Black Power emerged in direct relationship to a disinvestment with civil rights liberalism and liberal allies. However, some of the narratives that have emerged in Black Power scholarship have since elided this recognition in an effort to legitimate Black Power as a programmatic success.

Cedric Johnson responds to this trend in Black Power politics since the 1960s, arguing that we need to move beyond either vindicating or demonizing black radical politics. Instead, he posits, "black ethnic politics has run its course as an effective means to confront inequality." Johnson agrees with critiques from historians Robin D.G. Kelley and Peniel Joseph that movement histories have often overemphasized questions of "failure". However, he says, "The social fluidity, disruptive politics, and idealism that characterized the civil rights and black radical political tendencies of the fifties and the sixties dissipated as movement energies were channeled toward conventional pluralist politics." In this sense, he argues, there are both "scholarly and political ramifications" in addressing questions of decline and failure. In particular, he claims, "prospects for developing viable opposition hinge on how well intellectuals and activists understand the historical processes that created our current political conditions."[37]

Drawing on the experience of former SNCC members, including Ruby Doris Robinson, Phil Hutchings, and Gwendolyn Patton, Robinson argues that many Black activists have "spoke[n] out against prevailing orthodoxies within Black Power discourse" and "decried the retreats from purposive political action to ideological education, from participatory democratic formats to cults of personality, and from interracialism to ethnic politics." Offering an alternative to what he calls "race-first politics," Johnson claims that the contemporary political moment is

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[37] Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* xxxvii; xxxix; xxxvi; xxxvii.

"inadequate as an antidote to hierarchy and exploitation" and instead argues for "the instigation of popular, democratic struggles that are shaped by the everyday concerns and interests of working people and seek to transcend the culture and institutions of neoliberal capital."[38]

In calling for a critical engagement with Black Power, however, Johnson has effectively reasserted the exact themes celebrated in the declension narratives that much of the Black Power scholarship sought to undo. His critical analysis of Black radical politics since the sixties helps frame some of the contours of a necessary discussion about the challenges that liberation struggles face. However, rather than actually calling for a more critical engagement with how interracial, participatory, action-oriented programs can function *within* a radical framework, Johnson simply reasserts them as the solution. In effect, the analytic message is not substantially different from that of Payne, Hogan, or Carson, who mobilized the same arguments to delegitimize Black Power.

Matthew Countryman's *Up South* also celebrates a return to participatory democracy and locally-led community projects, though he differs from Johnson on his view of Black politics. His detailed history of civil rights and Black Power struggles in Philadelphia examines the interactions of Black Power, postwar liberalism, and Black electoral politics. Countryman argues that in Philadelphia at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, a "new generation of activists turned to the principles of community-based leadership, participatory democracy, and racial self-determination to replace liberalism's faith in antidiscrimination laws, technocratic government, and the New Deal coalition." "At its most fundamental," he argues, "Black Power in Philadelphia challenged the decision-making structures that controlled public and private investment in the city." While Countryman celebrates this development, the story in Philadelphia

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[38] Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, xxxv-xxxvi; xl.

is similar to the story in SNCC: "A decade after it began, the Black Power movement dissipated as African Americans experienced a series of clear lessons about the limitations of their ability to change public policy at the national and local level. Black Power suffered a number of strategic missteps. Most important, it never developed a feasible strategy, either political or revolutionary, for achieving control of political institutions in the black community. However, neither its strategic weaknesses nor the confrontational way it sought to renegotiate cross-racial relations were the primary cause of its failure. At root, Black Power advocates were never able to convince other elements of the New Deal coalition to bear the cost of its agenda for racial justice."[39]

Though Countryman's story suggests fertile ground for interrogating the function of participatory democracy and community-based leadership, his conclusions instead return to an unproblematized engagement with the very strategies and practices he positions at the center of the struggle. In this way, Countryman and Johnson demonstrate a trend toward fetishizing participatory democracy and community-based leadership. Instead of fetishizing programs, as was the case in other instances of Black Power scholarship, they return to the fetish of local community action that existed in previous declensionist narratives.

Rather than interrogating the fetishization and romanticization of local organizing, participatory democracy, and self-determined contours of struggle that undergird many of the movement's declensionist narratives, Black Power scholarship seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Those who are doing the important work of challenging the function and efficacy of Black electoral politics as a programmatic strategy for liberation run the risk of uncritically re-valorizing local struggles and participatory democracy in the same way that

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[39] Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 220; 256; 330.

locally- and internally-oriented scholars did two decades ago. It seems that what is needed is a more critical, more precise analytic engagement with effective ideologies, strategies, goals, and tactics. To be clear, this is not an attempt to discard locally determined projects, community control, or participatory democracy as legitimate practices or values in our liberation struggles. In fact, the goal is the opposite. In order to make use of them as a way to move forward, we must explore them as fully as we can. Without critically engaging these concepts, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. SNCC's experience within civil rights liberalism as it functioned organizationally, interpersonally, and internally, demonstrates the need to think critically and act differently in relation to how power functions within our liberation struggles.

Conclusion

Putting this discussion of Black Power scholarship more directly in conversation with the histories of SNCC, I propose that civil rights and Black Power historians have not effectively engaged a discussion of how liberalism and radicalism functioned within SNCC. Rather than a marker of radicalism, SNCC's embrace of Black Power in 1966 represented a public break with the civil rights liberal alliance. The distinction is that this break was not initially accompanied by a developed radical program or framework. Further, because of the complex ways that liberalism functioned *within* SNCC as well as outside of it, this break was necessarily incomplete.

One of the limits of declensionist narratives in SNCC and the movement more broadly is their tendency to focus on internal factors as an explanation for changes in the movement. Abandoning previous values and programmatic commitments explains the relative decline in activism in the later part of the seventies, which in effect minimizes critical engagement with the role of "COINTELPRO" and other kinds of state-sponsored repression. However, even if we

leave aside questions of state repression, internally focused narratives of declension still miss the mark.

SNCC's continued relationship to liberalism (rather than a decline in programs) better accounts for the eventual dissolution of SNCC. SNCC's inability to get outside of the liberal civil rights framework, even after they publicly rejected this framework, stymied the organization's effectiveness. Rather than a departure from SNCC's organizational past, the same limits of liberalism that had existed within early SNCC continued into the Black Power era.

SNCC's initial Black Power program was not radical. Their public emphasis on themes of Black consciousness and self-determination coupled with their explicit assertion of Black-centered struggle represented an important psychological break with the mores of civil rights liberalism. However, their pursuit of Black independent political, cultural, and economic institutions initially demonstrated a consistency with the liberal framework: a form of ethnic pluralism rather than a realized radical program. Though the emphasis on Black consciousness, pride, history, and culture has come under criticism for its role in de-politicizing and de-radicalizing Black Power, I contend that this emphasis was an important and transformative development within SNCC because it facilitated the organizational transition out of civil rights liberalism. Black-centeredness was not inherently radical. Instead, publicly centering Black people in the Black freedom struggle was part of how SNCC articulated a desire to break with liberalism.

Because Black Power was interpreted to be an expression of radicalism in mainstream responses, and because many in SNCC imagined it as an expansion of their already radical politics, SNCC's break with civil rights liberalism came to be recognized as an expression of Black radicalism. This limited analysis has reverberated because of how significant SNCC's

organizational transformation from civil rights to Black Power has been in broader narratives of the movement. The initial scholarship on civil rights and Black Power reiterated the media's conflation of Black Power into violence, racism, and separatism and used its association with Black radicalism as a way to vilify Black Power. Subsequent scholarship that sought to vindicate Black Power from claims of programmatic decline has also contributed to this misinterpretation by emphasizing Black Power era programs as a signal of SNCC's radical programmatic focus. In this way, both celebratory and defamatory narratives of Black Power in SNCC have conflated its initial articulation with Black radicalism. In effect, these narratives have obscured both the significance of SNCC's public break with liberalism and also the limits of not having a radical program.

The period between Sellers' turning point at Atlantic City in August 1964 and Wilkins' turning point in Mississippi June 1966 represented a crucial time in which SNCC tried to make sense of its relationship to the civil rights liberal framework. In this period of transformation a potential radical framework could have emerged within SNCC but did not. In this sense, both Sellers and Wilkins are correct: SNCC recognized having been abandoned by its liberal allies and subsequently, SNCC's Black Power slogan expressed a programmatic and ideological desire to reject civil rights liberalism in turn. Though Black Power was an explicit, public split with liberalism, it ultimately reflected a desire for a radical alternative more than its realization. In this way, SNCC's long-term investment in the liberal framework has gone under-acknowledged. This point of analysis could help us tell the story of what happened to SNCC after 1966. It suggests we might be better served by framing SNCC's organizational end not as a product of emerging radicalism but instead in relation to the continued presence of liberalism.

CONCLUSION

Though defamatory narratives of Black power as the "evil twin" of the civil rights movement have become increasingly outmoded, their specter remains in our popular narratives of the mid-century Black freedom struggle. More sympathetic accounts of the shift from civil rights to Black Power in SNCC often demonstrate the devastating impact of the MFDP betrayal at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and the accompanying realization within the organization that liberal allies and the federal government had abandoned the struggle. Perhaps more accurately, they were never allied with the struggle in the first place.

SNCC's changing relationship to the federal government and white liberal allies after 1964 impacted SNCC significantly, but this was not the source of its decline. These chapters start from the premise that taken individually, each of the dominant themes that are stressed in declensionist narratives of SNCC do not actually map onto the main narrative of decline that they purport. SNCC's organizational relationship to white activists within the struggle became a source of contention within SNCC as early as 1962 and continued to be unresolved well after the infamous expulsion of whites in December 1966. Their growing awareness of the limits of mainstream civil rights organizations and liberal allies began even earlier, at least by 1961, and the implications of this were never resolved within SNCC. Debates and divisions over the strategic value of nonviolence and armed self-defense were present from SNCC's organizational beginnings and while mainstream responses targeted this a primary site of organizational breakdown, internally, strategic questions around nonviolence did not take up nearly the kind of space they have been given in our historical narratives. The same set of ongoing internal challenges that SNCC faced before 1964 continued well after. After SNCC's embrace of the Black Power slogan; after the organization's decision to become all Black; after the election of

H. Rap Brown as Chairman: it was not new but old tensions that threatened the organization's continuation.

Initial declensionist narratives painted a rather simplistic picture of SNCC's decline, but the more historically attentive versions (those that have spent time examining SNCC activists' own perceptions) point to a shift from a programmatic to a rhetorical focus in SNCC's organizational emphases as a signal of its deterioration. Among SNCC's primary legacies is how they have come to influence activists' and scholars' valuation of local organizing both historically and in the present moment. SNCC in particular has become a main conduit in Black freedom histories to demonstrate the importance of local organizing. This comes from liberal and radical perspectives alike. As the last chapter suggested, the historiographical emphasis on local organizing as the solution for achieving Black freedom has remained under-theorized and under-interrogated in our dominant histories of the Black freedom struggle. Instead, it is more often romanticized. As a result, rather than interrogating how local organizing functioned, what it looked like, felt like, what it's challenges were, how it operated in different places, how it changed over time, and most significantly, what power dynamics were operating to limit the pursuit of freedom at the local level, our historical narratives more often point to local organizing as the uncomplicated solution to the problem of anti-Blackness and racism in the United States.

SNCC's relationship to effective local organizing programs was much more directly significant for the organization's trajectory than questions of nonviolence, the role of whites, and the role of mainstream institutions. However, this relationship does not map onto the timeline most often promoted in declensionist narratives. This project argues that while SNCC has become a primary symbol of successful on-the-ground local organizing in the Black freedom

struggle, SNCC's own history illustrates the dire need for deeper interrogation into how local organizing functions in a broader social movement context.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, internal power dynamics within SNCC's on-the-ground campaigns, and relationships between SNCC activists and local community members in the deep South had a significant impact on the success, sustainability, and political trajectory of the local campaigns and broader movement. SNCC activists were being radicalized through their on-the-ground work both through the lessons they learned from rural, southern, and less formally educated local people and also through their perennially disappointing experiences with the federal government and white liberal allies in mainstream media and the broader culture. And yet, at the same moment, SNCC activists had to recognize that their changing politics were not necessarily reflected in the local communities in which they worked. As SNCC activists began turning away from the federal government and mainstream liberals as their allies, they did so in the name of solidarity with local people, who they saw being tokenized or cut out of the decision-making process. Yet "local people" were often less likely than SNCC activists to carry such a strong critique, and in fact, often saw gaining federal support and access to the mainstream political process as a primary goal.

So what did it mean that the same "local people" who SNCC activists championed were much more open to working with the federal government, soliciting support from mainstream liberal allies, and trusting in their promises? What did it mean that some "local people" still wanted to work with the federal government when veteran activists in SNCC had had enough? Though SNCC activists labored over these questions among themselves, the always-changing political context of the movement forced them to also look ahead. Over time, SNCC began to work through these questions. Their best answer was Black Power.

Historical narratives have often framed the advent of Black Power in SNCC as abandoning local on-the-ground organizing for a more rhetorical approach that above all antagonized mainstream liberals and media. In these formulations, the shift in SNCC's national leadership from John L. Lewis to Stokely Carmichael in 1966 coincided with the shift from civil rights to Black Power, and symbolized the shift from local grassroots organizing campaigns to national media spectacles. But within SNCC at the time, as historians such as Hasan Kwame Jeffries have pointed out, something entirely different was going on. For activists in SNCC, John L. Lewis had been primarily a national, mainstream civil rights figure who stood next to "Big six" leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph. More than anything, these leaders spoke for the movement: they gave speeches, framed media narratives, and made public appearances. Stokely Carmichael, on the other hand, reflected exactly where SNCC was in 1966, and where they wanted to be. He had cut his teeth leading one of SNCC's most exciting on-the-ground organizing campaigns in Lowndes County, Alabama. While SNCC's local campaigns had struggled with the contradictions inherent in mobilizing Black people to vote for national Democratic candidates, Carmichael was leading the formation of a Black-led alternative political party in Lowndes County. For many in SNCC, the election of Carmichael represented a new phase and a deepening of their commitment to local, on-the-ground organizing, not its abandonment.[1]

However, mainstream narratives typically look to the public media spectacle surrounding Black Power, and the ways that Carmichael in particular engaged and responded to it, to solidify a narrative that located Black Power outside of SNCC's "golden era" of local organizing. Instead, they reinforce the notion that Black Power was the destructive foil to the promise of the

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[1] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964-1966," *Journal of African American History* 91:2 (Spring 2006).

civil rights movement. Yet as the examination of the March Against Fear in Chapter 4 has illustrated, the birth of the Black Power slogan in the U.S. Black freedom movement occurred in a Black-led, Black-defined, Black-oriented local, on-the-ground organizing context. The march itself was a manifestation of what Black Power was to SNCC in 1966, and this was deeply local, grassroots, and oriented toward organizing.

Rather than a simple transition from an organization that put primacy on local programs to one that prioritized media, image, and rhetoric, SNCC's relationships to these elements were always interconnected and fraught. SNCC was no less committed to local programs in 1967 than they were in 1963. But the political context in each moment was distinct enough that SNCC's implementation of their organizational goals and capacity to implement those goals looked very different.

This dissertation contends that SNCC's history of local, on-the-ground organizing throughout its entire organization life still requires deeper unpacking, interrogating, and re-visioning, particularly with an eye for the lessons we can glean from it for today. Further, we must rescue SNCC's history from the dominant narrative of the civil rights liberal framework. Thus far, historiographical celebrations of SNCC's "heroic period" of grassroots organizing have by and large re-inscribed the logic of the civil rights liberal alliance. They perpetuate the same narrative of the Black freedom struggle that helped to consolidate and expand the power of liberal allies at the expense of power for Black people.

In the post-Sixties world, the work of remembering and retelling the history of that particular period of the ongoing Black freedom struggle is imperative. But our historical narratives are not removed from the same kinds of politics that our subjects faced. When our histories of what Black actors did in the civil rights movement and Black Power eras are simple,

clean, and pretty, so that they celebrate respectability and morality, and condemn violence, for example; or when they romanticize SNCC for their local on-the-ground organizing but condemn them for their Black Power rhetoric, we perpetuate the same dynamics that maintain status quo hierarchies like white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.

The civil rights liberal alliance allowed for a nation-shaking social movement to emerge out of Black communities and become one of the central defining factors of the postwar era in the United States. But it also paved a new way for whites in power to maintain their power, and in fact expand it, while at the same time appearing to be more invested than ever before in the needs, interests, and humanity of Black people. We have not yet seen a significant structural transformation in the way that power functions in the United States. Thus, when our histories point toward a progressive narrative of change, culminating in the election of Barack Obama, for example, we are perpetuating the myth of the civil rights liberal alliance and continuing to de-center Black humanity in our shared liberation struggle.[2]

One approach has been to find as many instances of activism, resistance, and power in the Black community as possible as a way to combat the hegemony of civil rights liberalism. These inititatives are valuable. But a dominant trend now in Black freedom struggle scholarship has taken this approach to a troubling extreme in the form of the long civil rights movement. By erasing distinctions and specificity within the ongoing Black freedom struggle, even in the name of highlighting previously unseen or unacknowledged key sites of activism, we risk glossing over everything. Thus, struggle is struggle, and action is action, and power is power. But this

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[2] While I use Obama's presidential election as an example of a mythic narrative of American progress, I do not mean to diminish the historical importance of his election or presidency for African Americans or the United States as a whole. Obama's election is certainly an important political milestone. Instead, I am challenging some of the dominant narratives that suggest his election symbolizes the achievement of a post-racist society and the end of the struggle for African American equality in the United States.

kind of simplicity is exactly the logic that allowed for the white supremacy of the civil rights liberal alliance, and has allowed it to continue in the present day. Historians of the 20th century Black freedom struggle risk becoming the primary agents to perpetuate these narratives. We have an obligation to demand specificity and precision in our histories in order to combat that possibility.

Some of the greatest confusions around SNCC have been in terms of its relationship to radicalism. Defamatory declensionist narratives have equated SNCC's perceived decline in tandem with its perceived turn towards radicalism. Alternately, defenses of SNCC and Black power against these narratives have sought to celebrate the radicalism of Black Power as a symbol of SNCC's deepening commitment to Black people and Black freedom. Both of these approaches reflect yet another instance in which SNCC's trajectory has been misinterpreted. Though SNCC was in the process of transitioning from operating within the liberal framework of the civil rights movement and towards a radical framework connected to themes of Black Power, the initial call for Black Power in 1966 and the organizing program around which it was based were not part of a radical framework. Some scholars have called this a form of ethnic pluralism rather than Black radicalism. In line with this understanding, it is more accurate to locate the emergence of a radical programmatic framework in SNCC much later than the initial Black Power moment that has been so maligned and celebrated in our various historical narratives. By 1969, both James Forman and H. Rap Brown had articulated very different visions of what Black Power meant in terms of Black liberation than the one articulated by Stokely Carmichael in 1966-67. However, neither of these visions were given a chance to have a significant impact on SNCC organizationally. The shifting political terrain of the late-1960s Black freedom struggle included state repression of SNCC and difficulties due to the withholding of financial resources

and other support by former liberal allies. These changes in combination with the longstanding internal struggles that SNCC was still navigating prevented later articulations of Black Power from fully taking root within the organization. Thus, SNCC's political trajectory is more accurately the story of the rejection of the civil rights liberal alliance from within an organization whose work was formerly deeply rooted within the liberal civil rights framework rather than a story about Black Power radicalism eclipsing civil rights liberalism.

This distinction is valuable in two ways: 1) for specificity and accuracy. Conflating Black Power with a realized radical political program ignores the ways in which Black Power was still entwined with liberalism and mainstream U.S. politics, in spite of its open rejection of them. This misidentification disserves our continued and much needed development of meaningful radical political programs and visions; 2) it is valuable for helping to explicitly disaggregate mainstream liberal visions of freedom from actual visions of freedom. Liberation depends on developing strategies and building relationships that have the potential to undermine the hierarchies of power that structure our lives. Liberalism by nature seeks to affirm existing hierarchies of power, while using strategies of gradualism, reform, and co-optation to romance its opponents into submission and invisibilize its own power.

SNCC's public break with liberalism was a significant turning point in the civil rights liberal alliance. Among its most important lessons was the demonstration that liberalism could not be a legitimate ally for liberation. Unfortunately, this lesson has never fully taken root in our continued struggle. SNCC's inability to move past its relationship to liberalism illustrates the actual difficulty that such a paradigm shift entails.

Distinguishing between Black Power as a marker of anti-liberalism rather than a realized radical program is critically important to ongoing struggles for liberation. It encourages those in

the present moment to recognize that challenging the liberal framework that continues to define and influence our visions of liberation is an important part of our struggles, but it is not the same as embracing radical programs of change. We do a disservice to our struggles for freedom by leaving such distinctions murky and by not seeking deeper precision in our strategies and visions of liberation.

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