

## University of Louisville ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

---

8-2019

# Subversive sponsorship : organized literacy education and the long civil rights movement.

Jaclyn Hilberg  
*University of Louisville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/etd>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Other Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hilberg, Jaclyn, "Subversive sponsorship : organized literacy education and the long civil rights movement." (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 3281.  
<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3281>

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

SUBVERSIVE SPONSORSHIP: ORGANIZED LITERACY EDUCATION AND  
THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

By

Jaclyn Hilberg

B.A., University of Pittsburgh, 2011

M.A., University of Tennessee, 2015

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English/Rhetoric and Composition

Department of English

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

August 2019



SUBVERSIVE SPONSORSHIP: ORGANIZED LITERACY EDUCATION AND  
THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

By

Jaclyn Hilberg

B.A., University of Pittsburgh, 2011

M.A., University of Tennessee, 2015

A Dissertation Approved on

June 17, 2019

by the following Dissertation Committee:

---

Stephen A. Schneider

Dissertation Director

---

Bronwyn T. Williams

---

Susan M. Ryan

---

Mary Brydon-Miller

## DEDICATION

For Nate, who made this dissertation both possible and worth it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Stephen Schneider, Bronwyn Williams, and Susan Ryan, for their mentorship and for caring about me as a whole person. I am also tremendously grateful to Mary Brydon-Miller for so kindly stepping in as my outside reader amidst a very busy travel schedule. Thanks also to Bruce Horner for his substantial influence on my development as a scholar and for being such a staunch advocate for graduate students.

I moved to Louisville in June of 2016 with my husband and six-month-old daughter, and we left three years later with two more children in tow. Completing my degree in that time frame while raising three small children would not have been possible with the support of our Louisville “village.” Thanks especially to Megen Boyett; Pattie Koth; Julie, Jeff, Katie, and Zack Mushkin; Amy Nichols; and Jessica, Joshua, Isaiah, and Norah Rodenbaugh (who will always be family to my children). My parents, Jeff and Joanne Bankert, supported my family in more ways than I can count throughout the course of my graduate education. While I will never be able to thank them fully, I hope moving their grandchildren just a few blocks away is a start. I also want to express gratitude to my grandparents: Gordon and Barbara Bankert taught me to take joy in learning from a very young age, and Betty Dabbieri modeled the power of sheer determination. Thanks also to my siblings, Rachel Maxwell and Steven Bankert, and to my dear friend Nana Marfo, for their support throughout the long course of my education.

To my children, Evy, Alec, and Owen: Thank you for the clarity of purpose and joy you have brought to my life. Finally, to my husband, Nate: Your example makes me

strive to be the best version of myself every single day. Thank you for being the best partner, father, and friend I ever could have dreamed of.

ABSTRACT

SUBVERSIVE SPONSORSHIP: ORGANIZED LITERACY EDUCATION AND  
THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Jaclyn Hilberg

June 17, 2019

This dissertation presents literacy sponsorship as a narrative framework that complicates the history of black struggles surrounding educational equity as a civil rights issue. While that history has traditionally been framed as a fight for black access to and participation in white-sponsored institutions, this dissertation demonstrates that a number of prominent black intellectuals and activists instead argued for black sponsorship of black literacy and pursued such sponsorship as a political strategy to advance the goals of the civil rights movement. As such, this project contributes to the body of alternative historiography in rhetoric and composition that examines sites of literacy instruction located in the “extracurriculum” of composition, including the Council of Federated Organization’s Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project of 1964.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE.....	21
CHAPTER TWO.....	46
CHAPTER THREE.....	88
CONCLUSION.....	115
REFERENCES.....	123
CURRICULUM VITA.....	130

## INTRODUCTION

In 1956, Septima Clark was fired from her teaching position in Charleston, South Carolina. Having taught in the state's segregated public school system for nearly four decades, Clark attributed her termination to "my activities and work for my own people for social justice" (*Echo* 3). Clark's activism had connected her with Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School, who offered her a staff position at Highlander upon learning of her termination. At Highlander, Clark—sometimes referred to as a "grandmother" of the civil rights movement—was instrumental in the establishment of the Citizenship School program, described by Susan Kates as one of the most successful literacy campaigns of the 20th century. Clark later helped to direct the same program when its oversight was transferred from Highlander to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As an activist-educator associated with both of these major civil rights organizations, Clark's background as a schoolteacher deeply informed her work and her worldview; she regarded black illiteracy as a central obstacle to racial justice.

Septima Clark's long teaching career, both within and outside of formal educational institutions, exemplifies several key tensions surrounding black education during the civil rights era. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* declared racially segregated

schools to be “inherently unequal,” high-profile struggles surrounding school desegregation captured substantial national and even international attention (Allen; Dudziak). Yet while such ugly episodes as the standoffs between federal and state authority in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 and at the University of Alabama in 1963 fueled media narratives framing school desegregation as a major goal of the movement, the promise and even desirability of racially integrated schools was less straightforward to many civil rights activists. Some, such as Rosa Parks, favored school desegregation but felt that the issue was not pressing enough to motivate black communities to organize for racial justice (Wigginton 230). Others presciently worried that veteran black educators like Septima Clark would lose their jobs and, accordingly, their ability to exercise any control over the education of black youth. And others still expressed an abiding skepticism regarding the ability of existing institutions to offer an effective education to blacks given the structural racism of US society. This third line of thinking, in particular, led to a number of extra-institutional educational programs designed to advance the goals of the civil rights movement by providing African Americans with the education that existing institutional structures, built to entrench white supremacy, systematically denied them. Septima Clark’s termination from the Charleston public schools in 1956 illustrates the fate of black teachers who refused to toe the line of the institutional status quo, and her subsequent turn toward community-based educational programs outside of formal educational institutions exemplifies a key organizing strategy of the movement.

In this dissertation, I examine two such community-based programs that have not yet been explored by scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition: the Council of Federated Organization's Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project of 1965. I refer to these programs as examples of "organized literacy education" to underscore the explicitly political goals of their organizers and the deeply politicized contexts in which they operated. While I take the term "community literacy" to be related to what I mean by "organized literacy education," I also want to posit several important distinctions. "Community literacy" has come to be associated in the field of rhetoric and composition with, on the one hand, a specific type of rhetorical praxis for intercultural problem-solving (e.g., Peck et al.; Higgins et al.; Flower) and, on the other, literacy work that occurs primarily outside the context of formal educational institutions but typically with a connection to action research or service learning (Cushman et al.). The literacy education programs explored here fall into neither of these categories; instead, they functioned as political projects undertaken by civil rights activists to achieve quite specific goals. As such, literacy education tended to be implicit, but not central, to the aims of these organizers.

In addition to regarding literacy education as largely incidental to their political aims, the organizers of these programs advanced a vision of literacy that extended beyond reading and writing practices as such. Rather, a broader model of literacy, such as that developed by Jacqueline Jones Royster, seems to have

informed their thinking. Royster defines literacy as the “ability to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time” (*Traces* 45). Shirley Wilson Logan endorses Royster’s model in her study of rhetorical education in 19th century black America (4). The archival data analyzed in this dissertation suggests that black intellectuals and organizers during the civil rights era understood literacy as a similarly capacious phenomenon.

Moreover, an analysis of these organized literacy education programs reveals that this sense of literacy was deeply bound up in the broader political goals of civil rights activists working to organize local communities in their struggle for racial justice. These activists, as I argue in this dissertation, understood the connections between literacy education and social power that many scholars associated with the New Literacy Studies have been carefully explicating since the 1980s. Working from this understanding of literacy and education as always-already political, civil rights activists strategically organized community-based educational programs to advance the political goals of the movement. In this way, civil rights organizations served as sponsors of literacy, defined by Deborah Brandt as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way (*Literacy* 19). Brandt is especially interested in sponsorship as an economic relationship; in “set[ting] the terms for access to literacy,” she notes, sponsors serve as “delivery systems for

the economies of literacy” (*Literacy* 19). This focus on the economies of literacy squares with Brandt’s definition of literacy as a resource pursued primarily for its economic value (*Literacy* 5-7).

Yet Brandt’s “capacious” definition of literacy sponsorship (Gere, “Afterword”) makes it a useful analytical tool for uncovering the links between individual literacy and the broader systems—economic, political, and ideological—in which it is situated (Brandt, *Literacy* 19, 44-5; see also Brandt and Clinton). Scholars in rhetoric and composition have considered a broad range of individual (Pritchard; Webb-Sunderhaus), institutional (Goldblatt; Lebduska; Pedersen), and technological sponsors of literacy (Pavia; Yi and Hirvela). Moreover, scholars have recognized that multiple, competing sponsors often influence individuals’ acquisition and uses of literacy (Engelson; Meyers; Pavia; Webb-Sunderhaus). Additionally, the relationship between sponsors of literacy and those sponsored has been shown to be complex and far from unidirectional across a range of contexts. Scholars have been particularly interested in how this dynamic relationship plays out across contexts of asymmetrical power (Cushman; Engelson; MacDonald; Moulder; Pedersen; Pitcock; Tomlinson) and in community engagement or service-learning contexts (Alexander; Goldblatt; Goldblatt and Joliffe; Parks, *Gravyland*).

While much of the literature on literacy sponsorship cited above follows Brandt in accepting that literacy is economic, this work has also underscored the reality that the advantages sought and gained by both literacy sponsors and those being sponsored are not always strictly economic. For example, research

that examines the religious dimensions of literacy sponsorship suggests that the “advantage” sought by these sponsors of literacy may be more spiritual or metaphysical than straightforwardly material (Christoph; Engelson; Fehler; Moulder; Pavia). Governments, too, may act as sponsors of literacy seeking political as well as economic advantages (Lebduska; Pedersen). Moreover, individuals may self-sponsor their own literacies for a variety of personal purposes, not all of them necessarily economic (Hesse; Pavia; Roozen; Yi and Hirvela). Taken together, this body of literature suggests a disciplinary understanding of literacy sponsorship that is perhaps even more capacious than Brandt’s initial, economically-oriented articulation of the concept.

Applying Royster’s definition of literacy to Brandt’s model of sponsorship, as I do in this dissertation, further broadens the bounds of sponsorship to include a range of rhetorical practices that are not necessarily limited to reading and writing. Sponsors of literacy, in this broader sense, are agents who “enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold” access to particular information and the interpretation of its implications in pursuit of their own aims. This broadened model of sponsorship helps to account for the often nebulous role of traditional literacy in the context of a rapidly evolving political movement. The sponsors of literacy discussed here provided communities with access to particular political understandings and worked to get those communities to apply this knowledge toward specific political ends—ends associated with the broader goals of the civil rights movement.

Thus, when I refer to “literacy” and “sponsorship” throughout this dissertation, I am using the terms in a more capacious sense than that in which they are often invoked by scholars in literacy studies. I understand literacy scholars to take as their primary focus of study reading and writing *practices* and the social conceptions of those *practices* (Street). The focus on practices that characterizes work in literacy studies is not the primary focus of this dissertation, although I do refer to literacy practices at various points in my analysis. While the central concerns of this dissertation certainly overlap with those explored by literacy scholars, I am most interested in how civil rights activists conceived of and pursued literacy education as a politically subversive act within a particular historical context. Accordingly, I situate this dissertation within rhetoric and composition historiography.

#### The Civil Rights Movement in Rhetoric and Composition Historiography

While the news media at the time and historians since have focused primarily upon school desegregation—usually conceived as black access to and participation in existing white-sponsored institutions—as the major narrative throughline linking education to the civil rights movement, this dissertation suggests black *literacy sponsorship* as a complementary framework for conceiving of the relationship between the educational and political goals of the movement. By framing civil rights activists as sponsors of literacy and sponsorship itself as a political goal of the movement, this dissertation offers an alternative history of rhetoric and composition situated primarily in what Anne Ruggles Gere has termed the “extracurriculum” of composition—the spaces



outside of formal educational institutions in which a great deal of literacy practice and learning takes place.

The significance of the civil rights movement for the field of rhetoric and composition is implied but not treated explicitly in the first wave of histories of the field, published in the 1980s and 90s (Gold 6). For example, the origins of what Robert Connors has termed “contemporary composition studies” are often traced to the 1960s, when the Cold War and social movements of that decade both intensified the perceived national imperative for literacy education and increased the number of students enrolling in college (Berlin 180). While canonical histories of rhetoric and composition note the importance of the 1960s to the development of the field, they fail to adequately foreground the changing racial landscape of higher education as constitutive. To fill this gap in the historiography of the field, a tradition of alternative historiography has flourished since the late 1990s. Key to the establishment of this tradition was a two-part special issue of *College Composition and Communication* in 1999 devoted to (re)considering the journal’s history upon its 50th anniversary. Four articles across these issues, written by prominent scholars of color, consider rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary history regarding issues of race and racism (Smitherman; Gilyard; Villanueva; Royster and Williams). From different angles, these pieces grapple with issues of the access and exclusion of racial minorities from the field’s language practices (Smitherman; Gilyard) and “official” histories (Gilyard; Villanueva; Royster and Williams).

Attending to both the importance of the 1960s to the development of contemporary rhetoric and composition studies and the imperative to more adequately consider the field's history in light of race/racism, several alternative histories of rhetoric and composition have explicitly contended with the role of 1960s protest movements, and particularly the civil rights movement, in heralding many of the central tensions that continue to garner debate in the field. Most notably, Stephen Parks's *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language* (1999) has been credited with "restor[ing] politics to the history of composition studies" (Ohmann xiii). Parks examines the role of student protest movements and faculty activism associated with the New Left in bringing about the Conference on College Composition and Communication's "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL) resolution of 1974. His explicit attention to the interconnections between 1960s activism and developments in the profession of English reveals the range of competing ideologies that ultimately were negotiated into a single document: the SRTOL resolution. His treatment of ideological diversity *within* these student movements, however, is limited.

Carmen Kynard's *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* (2014) builds upon Parks's insights regarding the importance of the social movements of the 1960s to the history of composition studies, but Kynard treats the civil rights movement with more breadth and depth. By situating her study within a "long civil rights movement" beginning in the 1920s as opposed to a narrower, bifurcated movement primarily spanning the 1960s, Kynard offers a more thorough

consideration of how the Black Freedom Movements (as she terms them) of the 20th century fundamentally altered social conceptions and practices surrounding literacy instruction. Like Parks, Kynard focuses primarily on the role of student protesters and faculty (specifically faculty of color) in bringing about these transformations.

Other alternative histories of composition that directly grapple with the civil rights movement and its legacies have applied insights from critical race theory to the history of literacy instruction. Catherine Prendergast's *Literacy and Racial Justice* (2003) argues that *Brown v. Board of Education* and later Supreme Court decisions advanced the notion of literacy as white property, with literacy retaining its perceived value to the extent that non-whites were excluded from acquiring it. Sympathetic to this viewpoint, Steve Lamos in *Interests and Opportunities: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (2011) applies critical race theorist Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence to the history of basic writing instruction since the 1960s. These works share the conviction that developments in higher education for African Americans and other minorities have taken their shape from evolving white interests rather than genuine racial egalitarianism.

Taken together, these institutionally-focused alternative histories of rhetoric and composition share a common—although not always explicitly articulated—concern with access to higher education, to disciplinary scholarship, and to particular types of literacy for racial minorities. In other words, these works participate in a disciplinary tradition of defending the notion of greater access to

higher education from conservative critics, a project undertaken most explicitly by Tom Fox. While much scholarship has argued that access alone will not bring about racial equity (see especially Stuckey; Villanueva, *Bootstraps*), I certainly do not argue against the laudable project of increasing democratic access to higher education. Rather, I want to complicate the assumption that access to white literacy and literacy institutions has been and remains an overarching civil rights goal of the African American community, particularly in the context of the civil rights movement itself.

In making this claim, I situate my work largely outside of formal institutions. As Tom Fox has argued, limiting narratives of composition's history to the college writing classroom frames writing instruction as a limited enterprise designed primarily to maintain the existing social order. Foregrounding African American literacy in a history of writing instruction challenges this dominant framing by underscoring the political nature of literacy instruction (Fox 29). Histories of literacy education in African American communities further complicate the notion of access to existing institutions as the end goal of literacy education.

Indeed, a significant body of scholarship on African American rhetorical and literacy education suggests that African American communities may have been more concerned with acquiring and honing literacy for their own purposes than with simply gaining access to and participation in white institutions (with their language and literacy practices). Histories of African American literacy suggest that slaves underwent tremendous personal risk to learn to read and

write (Cornelius; Logan), with former slaves and their descendants continuing to place an extraordinarily high value upon literacy following emancipation (Anderson; Fox; Hale; Logan). The determination of freed(wo)men to secure literacy education for themselves and for their children continued through the Jim Crow era, with blacks frequently enduring “double taxation” in order to set up quality schools for their children, who were excluded from the white schools that their tax dollars were already supporting (Anderson; Hale). This history suggests that while blacks were highly concerned with securing access to literacy for themselves and their children, they were not particularly concerned with securing access to the *white* language and literacy practices associated with white educational institutions (Smitherman, *Talkin*; Prendergast).

Building from this history, my dissertation argues that conceiving of the relationship between literacy education and the civil rights movement through the theoretical framework of literacy sponsorship provides important nuance to historical renderings of an ideologically complex movement for racial justice. Throughout this project, I trace two competing lines of argumentation concerning how to promote educational equity in the United States. The first line of thinking, exemplified by the *Brown* decision, holds that access to and participation in existing white-sponsored educational institutions can provide minority students with equal educational opportunities. The second line of thinking, which I argue coalesces around the idea of black literacy sponsorship, stresses that the structural racism of US society precludes educational equity for black students without significant black control over the intellectual and material conditions of

black education. To be clear, these two competing models of educational equity both entail versions of literacy sponsorship. The difference between the models concerns who sponsors black literacy and toward what ends. Under the first model, whites retain sponsorship of black literacy by allowing for black access to and participation in white institutions. While this version of sponsorship differs in important ways from the white sponsorship of black literacy entailed by Jim Crow, this model of sponsorship nonetheless entrenches white control over black literacy. The second model, by contrast, promotes a version of sponsorship that allows for black control of black literacy. The historiography presented here suggests that arguments for black sponsorship of black literacy circulated well before and well after the *Brown* decision, with the Freedom Schools and the SCOPE project serving as two community-based efforts at such sponsorship outside the purview of existing institutions.

Chapter one examines arguments for black literacy sponsorship advanced by black intellectuals roughly two decades before and two decades after the *Brown* decision. Using historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's framework of a "long civil rights movement," I argue that the continuity between these calls for black sponsorship—as opposed to access to and participation in white-sponsored institutions—reveals a consistent throughline in debates surrounding educational equity in the United States. Framing black sponsorship as a primary goal of civil rights activists offers a way of conceptualizing school desegregation and the community-based literacy projects pursued by activist groups as bound up in larger debates regarding literacy and social power. Chapter one thus illustrates

that the skepticism of many civil rights activists toward school desegregation as a central educational goal of the movement is part of a longer black intellectual tradition, with chapters two and three examining organized literacy education programs as manifestations of this tradition.

Chapter two analyzes the Council of Federated Organizations' Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 as an effort by civil rights activists to institutionalize what Shirley Wilson Logan calls "free floating literacy" through sponsorship. This chapter demonstrates that COFO organizers regarded literacy education as a means of subverting the politics of Jim Crow, although the project's reliance on a primarily white volunteer teaching force may have limited the realization of its radical potential. Chapter three considers the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Summer Community Organization and Political Education program of 1965 as a case study of the blurry boundaries between literacy education, rhetorical education, and political education in the context of a constantly evolving political movement. Sponsorship, here, becomes a means of bolstering past organizational successes while attempting to build upon them.

Across these chapters, an understanding of literacy sponsorship as a subversive and potentially transformative political acts ties together the thinking of black intellectuals and activists ranging from W.E.B. DuBois to Septima Clark to Bob Moses to Hosea Williams to Derrick Bell. This dissertation presents a history of this subversive tradition of black literacy sponsorship during an era of US history critical to the development of rhetoric and composition as a field. While my intention is not for this study to be directly applicable to the writing

classroom, I do hope that this project demonstrates the importance of considering the tensions between access and sponsorship in our institutional and community work. We inherit these tensions as educators working in a system that is much too similar to the one DuBois decried in 1935.

## Methods

Each chapter of this dissertation is built around a different archive relevant to a key moment in the civil rights movement. Chapter one takes as its archives a 1935 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* (which includes W.E.B. DuBois's famous essay "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" along with contributions from an array of black luminaries) and the 1980 edited collection *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation*, edited by Derrick Bell. Chapter two considers an online collection of materials related to the Mississippi Freedom Schools available through the website [www.educationanddemocracy.org](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org); most of these materials can be found in physical copy at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison or the King Center in Atlanta. Finally, chapter three examines a published collection of primary source materials collected from the filing cabinets of SCOPE director Hosea Williams, which was put together by civil rights activist Willie Siegel Levanthal; some (though not all) of these materials may also be available in the physical archives at Stanford University. Time and budgetary constraints required me to limit my research to archives that I could access in Louisville (either online or as published collections).



When interpreting archival materials, I have worked to triangulate my interpretations across as many sources as possible. For example, when making a claim about a particular argument concerning literacy sponsorship gleaned from an archival source, I checked that claim against the available historiography, autobiographies and biographies, memoirs, oral histories, and other first-person accounts of the civil rights movement. When such accounts were unavailable—a major issue with the SCOPE archive in particular—I intentionally qualified claims (e.g., “the document *seems* to suggest”) to emphasize the more tentative nature of my interpretations.

Moreover, as a white person researching the struggle for black civil rights, I have worked to remain mindful of my own positionality throughout the research process. Jacqueline Jones Royster in *Traces of a Stream* offers useful guidelines for how to thoughtfully weave this attention to positionality throughout a project. Royster’s four principles for “demonstrat[ing] a commitment to both scholarly and ethically responsible actions” as a “researcher who is more outsider than insider in relation to the community targeted for study”—“careful analysis, acknowledgement of passionate attachments, attention to ethical action, and commitment to social responsibility”—informed my interpretation of the archival materials selected for analysis here along with my selection process itself (279).

Most significantly, my commitment to these principles led me to exclude from my analysis some materials that another researcher may have chosen to include. For example, I decided that as an outsider to the communities being studied, I was not comfortable with reproducing some of the highly offensive,

racist terminology found in the SCOPE archive. I made this decision even though the author of the language was himself a black activist reproducing the words of a white politician. In this and other similar cases, I chose quotations that I felt would capture the spirit of the archival materials without including the most offensive language found in the archived documents. Across each of the archives I examined, I also found instances of black communities being referred to in language that struck me as patronizing (at best). I generally chose not to reproduce this language unless I judged it to be indispensable to my interpretation of a document or its political context. I made such choices in an effort to maintain attentiveness to “ethical action,” again following Royster.

Ultimately, however, my readings of the archival materials and my written interpretations of them are informed by my own worldview, that of a progressive white woman who has undergone many years of formal education. My own politics and understanding of racism have been shaped more through my studies than through my lived experiences outside of the academy. My sense of distance from the subjects of this study has been both an affordance and a limitation of my positionality. While I came to my archives with relatively few preconceptions about what I would find—a strength, I hope, of my analysis—I also want to acknowledge that the central concerns of the activists and intellectuals whose voices are represented here differ from my own.

I conclude this introduction, then, by attempting to acknowledge my own “passionate attachments.” I first came to this project in 2017 with the firm beliefs that the Trump phenomenon should be attributed primarily to the persistence of

US racism and that rhetoric and composition as a field should do more to treat such racism as fundamental to the enterprise of literacy education in this country. Although the field has progressed in this regard since Catherine Prendergast in 1998 called race the “absent presence” and racism the “absent *absence*” in composition studies, I believe that there remains in the field a tendency to regard race primarily in terms of minority identity instead of as the central fault line in American political life—to the detriment of *all*. I first envisioned this project, then, as a contribution to the field’s efforts to reckon more fully with racism in the age of Trump.

As 2018 brought the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, I closely followed media efforts to (re)assess the strategies, gains, and legacies of the civil rights movement. Implied but usually unstated across the articles published and documentaries produced in 2018 was the sense that the meaning of the civil rights movement had changed between 2008 and 2018. If in 2008 it was possible to celebrate the seemingly vast historical distance between massive white resistance to desegregation in the 1950s and 60s and the election of the nation’s first black president, that perceived gulf had narrowed dramatically in 2018. The particular exigencies of the present, in which the Black Lives Matter movement has underscored the very-much-unfinished work of the civil rights movement and in which the US president openly and routinely expresses racist sentiments through both public statements and policies, have certainly informed my readings of the historical documents presented in this study.

Throughout my research for this dissertation, I have become convinced that Derrick Bell's theory of "interest-convergence" best accounts for the political gains achieved by civil rights activists during the time period studied here. Bell articulates this legal principle as follows:

The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites; however, the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedies sought threatens the superior societal status of middle- and upper-class whites.  
(*Brown*, 1995)

Bell intends for this principle to account for the seemingly uneven judicial application of the fourteenth amendment in civil rights cases, but it also provides a framework, for conceiving of civil rights history more broadly. For example, Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights* (2004) provides a compelling historiographical complement to Bell's theoretical work, illustrating that the civil rights gains of the 1950s and 60s served US national interests in the context of the Cold War—and that the federal government supported civil rights gains for blacks only insofar as they served those broader national interests.

While perhaps a cynical take on the accomplishments of a movement undertaken by many whom I regard as *bona fide* American heroes, I think a rhetorical perspective on these matters allows for more optimism. My readings of the archival materials analyzed here suggest that civil rights activists understood the rhetorical significance of interest-convergence, and they seized kairotic

opportunities to present their interests as converging with those of the white power structure. This dissertation examines the role of literacy sponsorship in advancing that convergence.

CHAPTER ONE  
BEYOND ACCESS: THE RHETORIC OF SPONSORSHIP AND THE LONG  
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

“[T]heoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated nor mixed schools.  
What he needs is Education.”

-W.E.B. DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” (335)

On September 4, 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine African American students attempted to attend their first day of school at the previously all-white Central High School. The “Little Rock Nine” were greeted by a mob of angry whites and barred from entering the school by the Arkansas National Guard, which had been mobilized by Governor Orval Faubus. Little Rock quickly became the international face of massive white resistance to school desegregation, a source of widespread white pride in the South and of significant embarrassment to the federal government (Dudziak). Ultimately, although reluctantly, President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered over one thousand troops to Little Rock to force the desegregation of Central High School. On September 24, 1957, federal troops marched past the mob and escorted the Little Rock Nine to their classes, providing these students with access to a white educational institution that had previously been closed to them (Patterson 110-1).

Two days later in Manhattan, veteran civil rights activist Ella Baker led a group of more than 500 black and Puerto Rican parents in a picket line at City Hall. Their group, Parents in Action, had been pushing for greater community control over public schools in the city for several years (Ransby 151-5). As Baker biographer Barbara Ransby relates, these activists “went beyond the simple demand for racial integration, calling for greater parent and community involvement in running the schools. . . . To insist that parents be empowered to define their children's education was a more substantive and radical demand than simply saying that black and white children should sit next to each other in the classroom” (155). This demonstration for community involvement in educational decision-making garnered little attention beyond the local level.

As historical matters, these two episodes—the former perhaps the most notorious instance of massive white resistance to desegregation and the latter largely unknown except to historians—epitomize a central tension surrounding educational equality in the United States. Equality is often framed as a matter of minority access to and participation in existing white institutions, as in the case of the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock. However, many civil rights activists seem to have been much more concerned with something closer to black *sponsorship*—control over the decision-making surrounding black literacy—than with access to and participation in white-sponsored institutions. As Ella Baker wrote in a 1957 letter to a friend: “The headlines especially are designed to give the impression that the only thing we are concerned with is integration rather than the fact that integration is desirable because where there

is separation, even in New York, the schools are too often inadequate” (qtd. in Ransby 155). The racial integration of schools, for Baker, was worth fighting for as a means to the end of quality education for students of color rather than as an end in itself.

This chapter examines the tension between access to white-sponsored institutions and black literacy sponsorship through two archives that represent critical moments in this debate: a 1935 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* that takes as its theme “The Courts and the Negro Separate School” and the 1980 publication of *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation*, an essay collection edited by Derrick Bell. Considering these publications through the framework of a “long civil rights movement” (Hall), I argue that both before and after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, prominent black intellectuals and activists expressed the viewpoint that access to and participation in white-sponsored educational institutions would not solve the problems facing the education of black youth. Rather, they make the case for black literacy sponsorship as a prerequisite for the proper education of black children in a fundamentally racist society.

This chapter thus adds to the body of alternative historiography in rhetoric and composition that considers the relationship between literacy education and the civil rights movement. Tom Fox, Stephen Parks, Carmen Kynard, and Steve Lamos have all positioned the movement as foundational to the formation of contemporary rhetoric and composition as an academic discipline. In this chapter, I follow Catherine Prendergast in tracking the relationship between



legal developments concerning school integration and the broader rhetorics of literacy and education surrounding these developments. However, while Prendergast positions *Brown* as the catalyst for a subsequent legal understanding of literacy as white property, I see *Brown* as instead representing the extant line of argumentation holding that black access to and participation in white institutions would bring about educational equality. In other words, by situating *Brown* amidst broader debates surrounding educational access and sponsorship, I deemphasize the role often attributed to the *Brown* decision in shaping subsequent attitudes toward educational equality. While acknowledging the importance of *Brown* in signaling a new era of race relations to Southern courts and legislatures, I treat the *Brown* decision as a moment imbued with social significance in a much larger conversation surrounding educational equality that began well before and continued well after the 1954 ruling.

While this chapter uses Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship as a framework for reading debates about educational equity, neither the term "literacy" nor the term "sponsorship" are used by the participants in the debates themselves. Rather, I aim to show that a concept similar to sponsorship has circulated among civil rights activists since at least the 1930s as a means of articulating a particular model of educational equality. In this context, reading and writing practices are implicated in but not necessarily essential to the educational relationship posited by the concept of sponsorship. Put another way, I am deliberately applying Brandt's terminology to a broader set of educational concerns than those that typically fall under the purview of literacy studies, i.e.,

reading and writing practices. I hope to show that Brandt's "capacious term" (Gere, "Afterword"), with its emphasis on the power dynamics that surround learning, can help us to reconceptualize one of our thorniest ongoing debates associated with educational justice in the United States.

### Educational Access, Literacy Sponsorship, and the "Long Civil Rights Movement"

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed down a decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* declaring the *de jure* segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional. The doctrine of "separate but equal" established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was famously overturned by the Court's declaration that segregated schools are "inherently unequal." Perhaps the best-known and most-celebrated Supreme Court decision in US history, *Brown* figures prominently in most popular narratives of the civil rights movement. Such narratives typically position *Brown* as a catalyst for an intensive period of nonviolent civil disobedience by African Americans in the South, beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott from 1955 to 1956 and culminating with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In these popular narratives, the dramas surrounding school desegregation in the South—such as the standoff at Central High School in Little Rock in 1957 or the riots surrounding the admission of black student James Meredith to Ole Miss in 1962—illustrate the massive white resistance to racially integrated schooling in the South. Thus, the struggle for black access to white-sponsored educational institutions serves as a significant plot line in most popular renderings of the civil rights movement.

Historical narratives that emphasize school integration as a primary goal of the civil rights movement and *Brown* as a flashpoint moment in its achievement have tended to minimize the ideological richness and diversity of a sweeping and hard-fought struggle for racial justice in the United States. This oversight may stem from the narrative pride-of-place afforded to the *Brown* decision and its particular articulation of the problem with segregated schools; the unanimous opinion handed down by the Supreme Court portrays school integration as a matter of black access to and participation in existing white institutions, with black students alone having been harmed by the prevailing system of racial segregation. The decision reads: “[D]oes segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal, *deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does*” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, emphasis added). The proposed legal remedy—a limited, unidirectional version of integration in which black students were simply to be represented in white institutions without in any way transforming those institutions—epitomizes the broader, dominant understandings of what the civil rights movement was about: black access to white institutions *writ large*, such as schools, lunch counters, and ballot boxes. That the institutions themselves would be transformed through this process—that African Americans would actually wield any significant influence over institutional structures—was not part of the remedy offered by *Brown*. And it was not part of the dominant white imagination,

then or now, of the possibilities of a broad-based movement for racial justice in the United States.

Many black intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens, however, had different ideas about the possibilities and desirability of this access, possibilities far exceeding the limited language of integration offered by *Brown*. As this chapter demonstrates, debates surrounding the merits and drawbacks of school integration began well before and continued well after *Brown*. Indeed, the terms of these debates so far exceeded the narrow scope of integration offered by *Brown* that they might better be characterized as debates surrounding literacy sponsorship (as opposed to debates primarily about school integration).

Constructing a narrative of black struggles surrounding literacy sponsorship as a civil rights issue, then, requires deemphasizing *Brown* and considering the civil rights movement through a broader lens.

Historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall's notion of the "long civil rights movement" offers a framework for engaging in this broader consideration. Hall describes the long civil rights movement as a period of sustained civil rights activism (although with shifting tactics and imperatives) beginning in the 1930s and continuing at least through the 1970s (and arguably through the present). She demonstrates that the black-labor activism of the 1930s and 40s, the "classical phase" of the civil rights movement in the 1950s through the mid-1960s, and the "black separatist phase" of the later 1960s and 1970s were all part of an ideologically and tactically rich movement for racial justice that was national in scope and sought structural changes to US society, as opposed to the simple access laid

out by *Brown*. Moreover, Hall argues that the (over)emphasis on the classical phase and the Jim Crow South as *the* civil rights movement has been a rhetorical strategy employed by conservatives to advance colorblindness, a racism less overt but just as pernicious as that of the past. Carmen Kynard has shown that Hall's notion of a long civil rights movement can productively complicate discussions in composition and literacy studies surrounding the links between students' political activism and their literacy practices.

This framework for conceiving of a long civil rights movement also provides a model for conceptualizing a long debate regarding the nature of literacy sponsorship in a fundamentally racist society. In this model, the *Brown* decision and massive white resistance to school desegregation serve as exigencies that influenced the debate surrounding educational access and sponsorship rather than the driving forces behind the debate itself. By examining two moments in this long civil rights movement—one roughly 20 years before and the other over 20 years after the *Brown* decision—this chapter emphasizes the continuity of calls for black sponsorship of black educational institutions, as opposed to the access to white-sponsored institutions prescribed by *Brown*.

#### Moving Beyond Access in 1935: The Case for Black Sponsorship before *Brown*

While it has since come to be seen as a strongly pro-integration organization (Bell), the NAACP of the 1930s and 40s was not unequivocally devoted to school integration as a prerequisite for educational equality. The organization's school "equalization" suits of those decades, often framed by historians as intentionally designed to chip away at *Plessy* as part of a grand

strategy to overturn the precedent and achieve school integration (see, e.g., Garrow; Hale; Kluger), can also be read as organizational tests of the extent to which school equalization—if truly possible in practice—could bring about the goal of educational equity. Tracking the development of lead *Brown* prosecutor Thurgood Marshall’s thinking on this matter, historian William Patterson relates that it was not until the late 1940s that Marshall began seriously considering a legal assault on school segregation itself (7). But even then, Patterson writes,

...many other black leaders in local NAACP branches resisted such a move. Some of them could not imagine that the white-dominated courts would support any significant transformation in racial mores. Others fretfully wondered: what would desegregation of schools really mean in practice? And still others, notably teachers, worried that desegregation would destroy black institutions, including schools. (7)

Sympathetic to concerns of this nature, a number of prominent black intellectuals questioned the extent to which school integration could redress the fundamental issue impeding educational equality: structural racism. These intellectuals argue that black access to and participation in white-sponsored institutions cannot bring about educational equality in the absence of shared *control* of those institutions; in other words, they make the case for black sponsorship of black education.

A 1935 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*, with its theme of “The Courts and the Negro Separate School,” provides an early archive of arguments for black literacy sponsorship. Of the five contributors who authored full-length essays for the issue, only one sees significant merit in the prospect of

the court-mandated racial integration of public schools in the United States—access to and participation in existing institutions—as a means of bringing about educational equality for black students. The other four authors, as I demonstrate below, question the extent to which school desegregation can meaningfully redress the structural racism from which the segregated school system emerged. Taken together, these four essays frame black sponsorship, rather than representation in existing institutions, as key to the advancement of educational equity.

Of the contributors to the 1935 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*, only Howard Hale Long, a Harvard-trained psychologist, argues that racially integrated schools might best serve the educational needs of black youth. Long draws extensively from contemporaneous psychological and educational research that establishes the formative nature of childhood experiences. Claiming that children exhibit race consciousness well before the age of five (335), Long contends that the “total setting of the segregated school literally forces a sense of limitation upon the child” (343). This claim – and its social scientific basis – foreshadows the rationale of the Supreme Court in striking down school segregation in *Brown v. Board*; the controversial footnote 11 of the *Brown* decision cites a number of psychological studies, including Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s famous doll experiment suggesting that black children prefer the physical attributes of white dolls, to support the claim that segregated schools harm minority children. Long differs from the Court, however, in his assertion that the system of school segregation also harms white children. He writes: “The

basis is laid for separateness, antipathy, and even race prejudice. These get underway early in the life of the white child. As a result, he grows up with a religion and a morality that do not extend, without serious provisos, to his dark fellow Americans” (348-9). This notion of the inculcation of white racism as harmful to whites as well as blacks does not factor into the legal remedy offered by *Brown*, and it suggests that Hale’s view of black access to and participation in existing institutions was likely more nuanced than that expressed in Chief Justice Earl Warren’s majority opinion 20 years later.

Opposing the viewpoint that access to existing institutions can bring about a meaningful change in educational outcomes for black students, W.E.B. DuBois’s “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?”—the most famous essay in the issue—most explicitly lays out the case for black sponsorship of black educational institutions. DuBois claims that “separate schools and institutions ... are needed just so far as they are necessary for the proper education of the Negro race” (328). This “proper education,” DuBois explains, requires a “sympathetic touch” between teachers and students predicated upon “knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group” (328). In other words, DuBois argues that black students need black teachers if they are to be properly educated amidst the racism of US society. White teachers—trained in white institutions and living in white communities—would not have sufficient knowledge of or contact with black history and culture to provide black children with anything resembling a real education. As DuBois puts it, the educational



prospects for black children at racially integrated schools would be "worse than pitiable": "The plain fact faces us, that either [the Negro] will have separate schools or he will not be educated" (329).

While DuBois does not explicitly advance a model of literacy or refer to particular reading and writing practices, his concerns about the "proper education" or black youth resonate with an understanding of literacy similar to Royster's. DuBois wants black students to be able to articulate their lives and experiences amidst the fundamental racism of US society. White teachers, in DuBois's view, lack both the education and the worldview necessary to promote this type of literacy for black students.

Beyond white ignorance of black life, however, DuBois cites the pervasive racism of US society as the primary force necessitating separate schools for the effective education of black youth. Rejecting popular contemporaneous arguments that tout the country's gradual progress in race relations, DuBois argues that white racial animosity toward blacks is in fact growing (328). Yet he decries "futile attempt[s] to compel even by law a group to do what it is determined not to do" as "a silly waste of money, time, and temper" (329). Prescient in its anticipation of massive white resistance to the *Brown* decision, this statement underscores DuBois's deep skepticism toward court-mandated school integration as a means of securing quality education for African Americans. Instead, DuBois argues, black activists should demand greater control over the material conditions and intellectual atmosphere of black

schools—the *sponsorship* of African American literacy toward community-driven ends.

Calling upon African Americans to organize around a rhetoric of sponsorship as opposed to one of integration, DuBois outlines specific demands that he believes should be associated with such sponsorship. First, black activists should demand better wages and opportunities for advancement for black teachers. Additionally, they should fight for better facilities and equipment for black schools (331). In effect, DuBois argues here for equalization as opposed to integration—the enforcement of the “equal” portion of the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as opposed to the legal overturning of the “separate” portion. But unlike the N.A.A.C.P. equalization suits of the 1930s and 40s, which sought the meaningful enforcement of *Plessy* as a means of working toward its eventual demise, DuBois sees promise in equalization as a worthy end goal for civil rights activists. Accordingly, he suggests that African Americans organizing around educational sponsorship should “kick out and leav[e] to the mercy of the white world those who do not and cannot believe in their own” (331). Lack of community faith in black enterprises, DuBois believes, impedes black literacy sponsorship to a greater extent than racial segregation:

As long as the Negro student wishes to graduate from Columbia, not because Columbia is an institution of learning, but because it is attended by white students; as long as a Negro student is ashamed to attend Fisk or Howard because these institutions are largely run by black folk, just so

long the main problem of Negro education will not be segregation but self-knowledge and self-respect. (331)

DuBois urges African American communities to work toward this self-knowledge and self-respect by pursuing literacy sponsorship instead of school integration.

To this end, DuBois advances a positive vision of black sponsorship that he believes could be transformative both for African American communities and for learning as a human enterprise. He calls especially for the study of history and the social sciences from black perspectives, arguing that in these disciplines “the Negro school and college has an unusual opportunity and role. It does not consist in simply trying to parallel the history of white folk with similar boasting about black and brown folk, but rather an honest evaluation of human effort and accomplishment, without color blindness, and without transforming history into a record of dynasties and prodigies” (334). By offering this fundamentally different approach to history and the social sciences, DuBois believes that black educational institutions “can become centers of a new and beautiful effort at human education, which can easily lead and guide the world in many important and valuable aspects” (334-5). Significantly, DuBois argues here for the type of fundamental transformation to education that the remedy of integration offered by *Brown* elides. Black approaches to education, he contends, must go beyond simply offering a black counterpoint to white approaches, instead utilizing racial consciousness to offer more honest appraisals of reality. In this way, the literate articulation of black lives and experiences could transform multiple academic disciplines.

But this dramatic transformation, in DuBois's view, requires a fundamentally different outlook on the separate school—a shift from a rhetoric of segregation to one of sponsorship. “It is for this reason,” he writes, “that when our schools are separate, the control of the teaching force, the expenditure of money, the choice of textbooks, the discipline and other administrative matters of this sort ought, also, to come into our hands, and be incessantly guarded and demanded” (335). Like Brandt, DuBois recognizes that sponsorship is bound up in societal power struggles, and he calls upon the black community to demand control of their own institutions if they are going to remain separate from white institutions. In other words, DuBois urges black activists to seize the advantages available through sponsorship as opposed to seeking access to institutions in which they would continue to be systematically disadvantaged.

Three other articles in the 1935 special issue offer viewpoints that complement DuBois's argument for black literacy sponsorship. For example, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's “The Status of the Negro in the American Social Order,” though not primarily about education or sponsorship, argues that the entire US economic system is predicated upon black subordination. As a result, blacks do not have a meaningful role in the sponsorship of black educational institutions: “The Negro intellectual leadership of the South, so far as the educational institutions are concerned, has no more independence in guiding the destinies of the Negro than a Negro driver on a Southern plantation before the Civil War” (304). Frazier points here to a need for black independence in school

leadership, implicitly arguing for black educational sponsorship as opposed to access to white institutions.

Chicago-trained historian Horace Mann Bond similarly offers arguments that point toward the significance of black sponsorship as a civil rights issue in “The Extent and Character of Separate Schools in the United States.” Supporting DuBois’s claim that equalization might be a more pressing issue than integration for black students, Bond provides extensive data to establish the material inferiority of black schools when compared to white schools. The inequality between black and white schools, Bond argues, “is shown in whatever index is taken to measure relative educational efficiency from the structural viewpoint—length of term, salaries, the provision of teachers, buildings, or equipment” (324). This very inequality, Bond contends, serves as the *raison d’être* of the system of school segregation: “The basis for the separate school is apparently an unwillingness of the white population to accept the Negro as a full participant in the life of our Democracy” (*sic*, 324). The sheer expense of the dual system, in Bond’s view, attests to the extent to which whites are unwilling to accept full black citizenship (325). Accordingly, Bond regards the separate school itself as less significant than what it symbolizes: the “more important maladjustments of the Negro in the United States” (327). But a possible remedy for this situation, in Bond’s view, extends far beyond the debate surrounding segregated versus integrated schools, requiring fundamental shifts in the social power structure that schooling alone cannot initiate. In his recognition that societal power underlies

any approach to education, then, Bond advances an implicit rhetoric of sponsorship that bolsters the claims of DuBois and Frazier.

Ralph J. Bunche, a Howard University political scientist and the first African American winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, employs similar arguments to cast doubt upon the efficacy of the court-mandated desegregation of schools in his “Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups.” Firm in his belief that neither the Supreme Court nor the federal legislature can enforce what the dominant social will rejects, Bunche contends that the Supreme Court’s long history of inventing legal fictions to overlook the political reality of African Americans should give serious pause to civil rights activists seeking to redress educational inequity through the justice system (315-8). Like DuBois, Bunche seems to anticipate massive white resistance to school desegregation, similarly noting the need for fundamental social change to occur before racially-integrated educational institutions can become spaces of meaningful education for African Americans (320).

Taken together, these four articles advance a rhetoric of black literacy sponsorship that extends well beyond calls for black access to and participation in existing white-sponsored institutions. In 1935, these writers anticipated a lack of meaningful educational improvement for minority students through court-mandated access to white-dominated schools, instead arguing for black control over the intellectual and material conditions of black schools. Their arguments, as the next section illustrates, were prescient.

## From DuBois to Derrick Bell: Extending the Case for Black Sponsorship after *Brown*

Upon handing down the *Brown* verdict in May 1954, the Supreme Court issued a symbolic victory to black activists seeking access to white educational institutions without specifying precisely how that access was to be implemented. A second decision in 1955, known as *Brown II*, ordered that school desegregation was to proceed with “all deliberate speed,” a blow to activists who accurately predicted how this mandate would be interpreted by Southern legislatures and courts. The ensuing massive resistance to school desegregation was so effective that by 1964, ten years after *Brown* became the law of the land, only 2.3% of black students attended majority-white schools in the South (Orfield and Lee 19).

However, with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and subsequent Supreme Court decisions in *Green v. New Kent County* (1968), *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969), and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (1971), *Brown* began to be meaningfully enforced through school racial balance orders and court-mandated busing. By 1970, nearly one-third of black students in the South attended majority white schools (Orfield and Lee 19). That number continued to rise until 1988, at which point 43.5% of Southern black students attended majority white schools (Orfield and Lee 19). Thus, at least in the South, the court-mandated racial integration of schools was effective in helping minority students to gain access to and participation in existing white institutions.

Although this data would seem to indicate the success of the *Brown* mandate in bringing about black access to and participation in existing white-sponsored educational institutions, many black activists, educators, and parents continued to doubt that such access could engender educational equality for black students. The 1980 publication of *Shades of Brown: New Perspective on School Desegregation*, edited by Derrick Bell, provides an archival snapshot of these perspectives on school integration, this time following the 25th anniversary of the *Brown* decision. As one of the first collections to consider the *Brown* decision in light of its long-delayed implementation in the 1970s, this collection presents a range of perspectives concerning the effectiveness of black access to white-sponsored institutions as a meaningful legal remedy to the harm of school segregation. Editor Derrick Bell, a former civil rights attorney who has become one of the leading voices in the critical race theory movement, gained prominence with his publication of a 1976 article entitled “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation” in the *Yale Law Journal*. His suggestion in the article that “civil rights lawyers are so committed to racial balance remedies, they fail to recognize that their clients most want effective schooling for their children” was, in Bell’s words, “not received well by my former civil rights colleagues” (*Shades* 136). In collecting a series of essays that he believes may be similarly received, Bell describes an “integration ideology” among many in civil rights circles to which he attributes an almost religious faith in the promise of racial integration as a prerequisite for black social equality (“Introduction” vii-viii).



Yet Bell and the contributors to the 1980 collection are deeply skeptical of this ideology, although they have different perspectives regarding the symbolic importance of *Brown* as a harbinger of racial change. On one end of the spectrum, Judge Robert L. Carter, a member of the prosecutorial team of *Brown*, suggests that while school integration must remain an end goal of civil rights activists, the matters of “school financing, school districting, educational offerings, teaching methodology, and the delivery of services” may ultimately matter more for the effective education of black youth (28). Carter thus maintains the importance of access and participation while pointing to the greater urgency of issues more closely related to sponsorship.

On the other end of the spectrum, Alan Freeman, a law professor at the University of Minnesota, argues that the structural racism of US society makes the racial integration of schools an unlikely prospect, even 25 years after *Brown*. Freeman notes that the courts have overwhelmingly upheld the view that racism consists of discriminatory acts perpetrated by individuals against individuals. This legal fiction precludes the possibility of meaningful structural remedies for educational inequity, making true black access to and participation in white-sponsored institutions elusive. A reprint of Derrick Bell’s “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma”—discussed in the introduction of this dissertation—serves as a chapter in the collection and complements Freedman’s viewpoint by suggesting that the promotion of civil rights for blacks has never been the primary aim of civil rights legislation.

Occupying a middle ground in the collection, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, a Professor of Education at Harvard University, and Ronald R. Edmonds, an administrator in the New York City public schools, argue against the enactment of racial balance remedies while remaining open to school integration as an ideal. Lightfoot criticizes the social scientific basis of *Brown*, asserting that the complex interactions between schools, families, and communities make it difficult to isolate and assess the role of racial segregation in educational outcomes. Sympathetic to this viewpoint, Edmonds focuses on high-achieving majority-minority schools as evidence that segregation itself is not inherently an educational problem.

Taken together, these authors share the conviction that effective education for minority children must serve as the overarching goal of continued efforts at implementing *Brown*. Bell's concluding chapter for the collection, "A Model Alternative Desegregation Plan," builds upon this shared conviction to outline a method of school desegregation centered around black literacy sponsorship. The first pillar of such a plan, in Bell's view, is black community input through public hearings. Through engaging in this process, specific districts could work toward realizing desegregation plans that advance the interests of the communities they serve, as opposed to responding to court orders meant to address the particular legal complaints of plaintiffs (*Shades* 128-9). In addition to these public hearings, Bell calls for desegregation plan committees that include minority parents who are well-known throughout the community, along with educators, a lawyer, and a social scientist (*Shades* 129). These measures would

give community members some control over the direction of school desegregation in addition to the opportunity to foreground the educational outcomes most desired by the community.

An actual desegregation plan crafted by this committee, Bell argues, should honor the *Brown* mandate while prioritizing the material and academic improvement of majority-minority schools. On top of calling for the equalization of funding and teacher salaries across predominantly white and majority-minority schools, Bell believes that a strong desegregation plan should include “ample opportunity for black and other minority parents to be involved in their children’s schooling. This may include provisions for participation in planning and policymaking but should ensure parental cooperation in, and understanding of, the teaching and learning process” (130). In other words, Bell argues in favor of the role of minority communities and parents in particular as partial sponsors of their children’s education. Such an approach to school desegregation would likely have satisfied the demands of Ella Baker and the Parents in Action protesters in 1957.

\*\*\*

The remarkable continuity between DuBois’s arguments in 1935 and Derrick Bell’s in 1980—characterized by historian William Patterson as a “stubbornly persistent minority view” (9)—underscores an important strand of black thought surrounding educational opportunity and equity. While Patterson associates this line of thought with a broader tendency toward black separatism, I offer sponsorship as a competing frame for understanding these calls for black

control of black institutions. This positing of sponsorship as the consistent thread that runs through these arguments emphasizes the long tradition of black skepticism toward participation in existing institutions as a means of securing their civil rights. This intellectual tradition gave rise to many of the extra-institutional educational programs of the civil rights movement, such as the Council of Federated Organization's Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Summer Community Organization and Political Education project of 1965, to be explored in subsequent chapters.

#### The Debate Continues: Access versus Sponsorship in the Twenty-First Century

In April 2019, protesters gathered in front of City Hall in Manhattan. Unlike the group led by Ella Baker 62 years earlier, these protesters were not seeking to change the educational status quo. Rather, they were fighting to maintain that status quo through the preservation of an entrance examination required for applicants to New York City's elite public high schools. Founded in the early 20th century, these schools were designed to provide a public education equivalent to that of an elite private school to low-income students throughout the city, a group that consisted mainly of immigrants during that time period. Today, Asian-Americans are dramatically overrepresented at these elite public schools, with black and Latinx students substantially underrepresented at these schools, based on New York City's overall demographics.

To increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the schools, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio proposed eliminating the entrance examination. The

examination had been codified by the state legislature in 1971, the same year that the Supreme Court ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* that busing was permissible to expedite the racial integration of public schools. Predictably, a local industry of exam preparation popped up, with some students beginning to study and receive tutoring for the entrance examination years before they would be old enough to sit for it. In 2019, 895 students who earned top marks on the entrance examination were accepted into the incoming freshmen class of New York City's Stuyvesant High School. Seven of those students are African-American (Barbaro).

While the particular social tensions surrounding these elite public schools in New York City are complicated, one conclusion seems difficult to escape: the city's black secondary students do not have meaningful access to these schools. Moreover, the protests to demand the maintenance of the entrance examination and the attendant racial disparities in incoming classes suggest a continued lack of social consensus surrounding access to and participation in existing institutions as a means of redressing educational inequality. This reality bolsters Danielle S. Allen's claim that the most significant impact of *Brown* may have been its exposure of the deep fault lines in American public life—fault lines that persist into the present.

The undeniable failure of *Brown* to bring about educational equality for minority students does not necessarily settle the debate surrounding access versus sponsorship as models for achieving equity. Supporters of the general mandate of *Brown* argue that the decision was never properly implemented (see,

e.g., Orfield and Lee), while a “stubbornly persistent minority” continues to argue that black sponsorship of black literacy matters more than participation in white institutions. The ongoing relevance of this debate suggests that the color line remains the predominant educational problem of the twenty-first century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE LINK BETWEEN A ROTTING SHACK AND A ROTTING AMERICA”: LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SCHOOLS OF 1964

On June 21, 1964, three young men—one of them black and the other two white—left a jail in Neshoba County, Mississippi. They’d been arrested by a local sheriff earlier that afternoon and were released from prison around 10:30 pm. By then, panic had set in at the local offices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), where civil rights workers had notified the central office in Jackson that the three men hadn’t returned from their scouting trip that afternoon. Nearly twenty-four hours later, the FBI became involved in the search for James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman.

The disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman brought intense media scrutiny to a state whose segregationist government already believed itself under siege. Activist groups had very recently launched the Freedom Summer campaign throughout Mississippi with the primary goals of registering disenfranchised black Mississippians to vote and establishing an alternative political platform through the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the overt white supremacism of Mississippi’s traditional Democratic Party. Indeed, Andrew Goodman, one of almost one thousand white volunteers who would make the journey to Mississippi that summer to join the civil rights

movement, had arrived in the state just the day before his disappearance. He was twenty years old.

While the disappearance of the three civil rights workers—all presumed dead—left Freedom Summer organizers heartsick, in many ways they had anticipated and planned for such a tragedy. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) activists, all brought together under the COFO umbrella to coordinate their efforts in Mississippi, were keenly aware of the need to train national attention on the Magnolia State, even as they engaged in highly localized struggles for civil rights. In their “Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer,” COFO organizers explain:

Previous projects have gotten no national publicity on the crucial issue of voting rights and, hence, have little national support either from public opinion or from the federal government. A large number of students from the North making the necessary sacrifices to go South would make abundantly clear to the government and the public that this is not a situation which can be ignored any longer ... (36)

The disappearance of white volunteer Andrew Goodman, along with veteran activists James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner, certainly garnered this attention, dominating national and international media coverage and subsequent historical memory of Freedom Summer. This intense contemporaneous and historiographical attention to the effort to recover the young men has largely



obscured the fact that literacy education was at the heart of one of the ugliest episodes in civil rights history. When Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi, they had been investigating a potential site of extracurricular literacy education: a burned church that had been slated to house a “Freedom School.”

The Freedom School program—a network of community schools designed to complement the voter registration work of Freedom Summer—served over two thousand black Mississippians in July and August of 1964 (Hale 109). Students gathered in backyards and church basements to study subjects ranging from literature to mathematics to African American history and more. While the educational scope of the Freedom Schools extended well beyond reading and writing instruction, literacy was regarded by Freedom School organizers as integral to the broader program of political education and activism that the schools advanced. In this way, the Freedom Schools participated in the African American tradition of what Shirley Wilson Logan calls “free floating literacy.” Borrowing the term from Ralph Ellison, Logan explains: “African Americans who found themselves in environments that limited their ability to develop English literacy created their own opportunities to do so, although the pursuit of other liberties was frequently their primary concern” (11). In this chapter, I argue that COFO sponsored the Freedom Schools in an effort to *institutionalize* this free floating literacy as a means of subverting the politics of Jim Crow in Mississippi.

This chapter situates the Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 within a longer history of activist literacy sponsorship in Mississippi during the “classical

phase” of the civil rights movement, the period from 1954 to 1965 usually associated with nonviolent civil disobedience. The archival data presented here illustrates that literacy sponsorship served as a means of subverting the politics of Jim Crow during Freedom Summer in at least three specific ways. First, by circumventing white-dominated institutions to establish alternative sites of literacy education, COFO activists capitalized upon the very system of segregation meant to keep African Americans subordinate to whites. Second, by advancing an alternative vision of literacy antithetical to that forwarded by the white power structure, Freedom School organizers encouraged black youth to question the fundamental conditions of their oppression. And finally, by sponsoring literacy on their own terms instead of seeking access to white institutions, COFO mobilized Mississippi youth to make political demands of their own—including demands for the right to sponsorship itself. However, as this chapter makes clear, the tensions surrounding the implementation of the Freedom School vision also suggest the limitations of literacy education as a vehicle for promoting socially progressive ends.

#### “Unlocking Mississippi”: Establishing Alternative Sites of Sponsorship before Freedom Summer

Dominant historical renderings of the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi have tended to privilege the classical phase of the movement, underscoring the events that captured national media attention. Historian Jon N. Hale emphasizes the typical flashpoints of these narratives: the Freedom Rides of 1961; James Meredith’s desegregation of Ole Miss in 1962; the assassination of NAACP field

secretary Medgar Evers in 1963; and Freedom Summer in 1964 (38). Hale notes:

These events have received the most attention and have therefore dominated the interpretation of Mississippi civil rights history. Such a narrative situates Mississippi as a staunchly racist and conservative space with little agency for local African Americans. What the American public did not see on television or read in the newspapers was ... the dialectical relationship between locally sophisticated civil rights networks and the larger national movement. (38)

Hale points here to the ideological and historiographical baggage that accompanies any narrative surrounding race relations in Mississippi during the civil rights era. On the one hand, black Mississippians faced perhaps the most oppressive racism found anywhere in the country, and this atmosphere of grave danger necessarily limited civil rights activity in the state. On the other hand, civil rights activists *did* engage in complex efforts to organize in Mississippi, always at tremendous personal risk. These efforts proved particularly important as civil rights activists began to complement their traditional political goals with more nuanced educational aims—as COFO needed to tap local material and human resources to establish the Freedom Schools. In this section, then, I provide an overview of civil rights activity in Mississippi prior to Freedom Summer that considers the sustained efforts of activists in light of Mississippi’s firmly entrenched white supremacist power structure, focusing primarily upon those

efforts that most directly laid the groundwork for COFO's sponsorship of the Freedom Schools.

As a number of historians have noted, prior to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, relatively limited civil rights activity took place in Mississippi. The Mississippi state government was considered to be the most repressive toward African Americans in the nation, with severe restrictions placed upon black voters in the forms of poll taxes and literacy tests (Dittmer 6). While the *Brown* verdict did not precipitate much change to Mississippi's segregated system of public education in the first decade after it was handed down, *Brown* did prompt a broader range of civil rights activity in Mississippi, including some efforts to initiate and sustain a durable social movement. The Supreme Court's endorsement of school integration, interpreted by many as a harbinger of a national shift toward greater concern for racial justice, encouraged voter registration campaigns in African American communities across the state of Mississippi. Moreover, the NAACP established a more permanent presence in the state, with Mississippian and World War II veteran Medgar Evers employed as the state's first full-time field secretary beginning in 1954. In its tradition of working primarily through the legal system, the NAACP initiated a number of desegregation petitions designed to test the *Brown* decision in Mississippi (Dittmer 41-52).

The NAACP desegregation suits revealed another major repercussion of *Brown* in Mississippi: white backlash in the form of Citizens' Councils. These white supremacist organizations, with the support of elected officials and the

state's largest press, sought to uphold the status quo of segregation through both legal and extralegal means, almost always with impunity. Through economic and physical intimidation, the Citizens' Councils effectively silenced school desegregation petitioners and, capitalizing upon the inaction of the Eisenhower administration, crushed NAACP efforts in Mississippi. Citizens' Councils used similar tactics to stall voter registration efforts and instill an overall atmosphere of violence and fear across the state (Dittmer 46-53). Even when the Emmett Till lynching in 1955 brought national media attention to the atrocities of white supremacists in Mississippi, the federal government remained reluctant to intervene, tacitly endorsing a lawless reign of terror across the Magnolia State and revealing the lack of any meaningful national consensus concerning racial justice.

This was the "closed society" that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) encountered when it began its civil rights efforts in Mississippi. Founded in April 1960 in an effort to transform the limited student sit-in movements of that year into a broader movement for civil rights led and sustained by young people, SNCC leaders understood from the beginning the need to capture the attention of multiple audiences—looking "beyond the South, into the Pentagon, into Europe, and into Russia"—if they wanted to engender meaningful social change (Carson 28; cf. Dudziak). SNCC strategically sought to balance the need to engage these multiple audiences with the critical goal of developing indigenous leadership and sustaining the energy of the local communities that would perform the difficult daily work of the civil rights struggle.

SNCC's initial inroads in Mississippi were forged by a New York City teacher and former Harvard graduate student named Robert Moses. Moses had initially traveled from Harlem to Atlanta in 1960 to join the efforts of the SCLC, but he found little work for himself in a top-down organization built around charismatic leadership (Moses and Cobb 34-7). Influenced by Ella Baker, the once-executive director of the SCLC who had turned her attention toward helping student activists envision a program of grassroots organizing, and Jane Stembridge, the first executive director of SNCC, Moses decided to travel around the Deep South to recruit participants for SNCC's fall conference (Moses and Cobb 36; cf. Ransby). With an itinerary structured around Baker's NAACP contacts in the region, Moses purchased a bus ticket and set out for Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

These NAACP contacts would prove vital to SNCC's ability to organize and sustain a civil rights program in Mississippi, with particular significance for the organization's literacy sponsorship efforts. As Moses relates, NAACP leaders across Mississippi tended to possess material and financial resources that granted them a degree of independence from Mississippi's white supremacist power structure. For example, Amzie Moore, the NAACP leader in the Mississippi Delta who would influence Moses's thinking profoundly, owned a gas station along a well-traveled highway and worked part-time in a federally-funded post office job (Moses and Cobb 39). It was Moore who convinced Moses that the key to opening up Mississippi's white supremacist power structure was the ballot. Moses recalls:

[Moore] was not interested in sit-ins to desegregate Mississippi's public accommodations. ... He favored school integration but the NAACP's legal battles for it were not his priority. He had concluded that at the heart of Mississippi's race problem was the denial of the right to vote. Amzie wanted a grassroots movement to get it, and in his view getting that right was the key to unlocking Mississippi and gaining some power to initiate real change. (Moses and Cobb 41)

As SNCC debated whether to pursue voter registration or direct action campaigns, Moses, influenced by Moore, questioned the distinction: "Amzie Moore had already convinced me that in hard-core areas of the Deep South, voter registration *was* direct action" (Moses and Cobb 44).

Yet voter registration in Mississippi—at least for African Americans—was deeply tied to literacy, with white registrars granted the power to require applicants to read and interpret a section of the state Constitution. Consequently, when Bob Moses returned to Mississippi after his initial trip to establish a more permanent presence for SNCC, voter registration classes devoted to helping local blacks understand the voter registration form and the Mississippi Constitution figured prominently into his work. To advance this work, in late summer of 1961, Moses traveled to McComb, a town of 13,000 residents in the southwestern part of the state, at the behest of C.C. Bryant. Bryant, head of the NAACP in McComb's Pike County, had the financial independence from the state's white supremacist power structure that was vital to literacy sponsorship outside that power structure. Moses relates:

[Bryant] worked for the Illinois Central Railroad; his paycheck came from Chicago. He was a church deacon, Boy Scout leader, and Sunday school teacher as well as NAACP branch president. He barbered in his front yard, and kept a small “library” of Black newspapers, books, and NAACP material there. C.C. was also an official with the Freemasons and arranged for me to use the second floor of the Masonic temple as a voter registration school. A butcher shop occupied the ground floor of the unpainted wood and cinder block structure. (Moses and Cobb 45)

Bryant’s network of connections in McComb’s African American community was essential to SNCC’s ability to make inroads in southwest Mississippi. Moses refers to this social network as comprised of “Black people of ‘standing’—folks who were making their living off the Black community in an era of racial segregation” (Moses and Cobb 45).

While some of these connections would contribute more directly to SNCC’s literacy sponsorship efforts than others—Moses cites Bryant and E.W. Steptoe of Amite County in particular for providing the physical spaces that would serve as voter registration schools—a fairly consistent narrative regarding literacy sponsorship emerges from these early accounts of SNCC’s voter registration work in Mississippi. The existing social networks forged by NAACP leadership in the state provided the human and material resources that SNCC could tap into to get its own literacy sponsorship initiatives off the ground. And these existing networks consisted almost entirely of individuals who did not



depend upon the state's white supremacist power structure for economic sustenance.

While the support of NAACP leaders and civil rights activists was a starting point for literacy sponsorship, SNCC's ability to gain the support of those Mississippians who did not enjoy this financial independence from the state economy would ultimately determine the success of such sponsorship. Here, Moses and the McComb voter registration project faced a profound challenge. Moses believed strongly in the importance of developing local black leadership, a difficult task given local blacks' distrust of civil rights workers amidst the atmosphere of white harassment and intimidation that characterized Mississippi in general and McComb in particular (Carson 78-9). Despite some success in getting black Mississippians added to McComb's voter rolls, the brutal white backlash to SNCC's efforts—including the arrest and beating of Bob Moses—took a psychological toll on the black community. A series of local sit-ins and direct action protests launched by young people further alienated some members of the black middle class, who had more to lose economically than their poorer neighbors and thus had been wary of civil rights agitation from the beginning (Dittmer 104-8).

While the direct action protests unsettled many of McComb's middle-class black residents, such efforts energized many of the youth who would go on to attend the Freedom Schools during the summer of 1964. In particular, the September 1961 jailing of five student-activists who had participated in sit-ins catalyzed the involvement of black youth in the localized McComb civil rights

movement. When two of the students, released on bail, attempted to return to their segregated high school and were denied admission by the principal, over 100 students walked out of the school in protest. As John Dittmer relates, “McComb had never seen anything quite like it: more than 100 young people marching through the middle of one of the toughest towns in the country, carrying their handwritten banners and singing ‘We Shall Overcome’” (110). The students, along with the SNCC activists in attendance, were ultimately arrested and expelled from school unless they signed a pledge not to participate in further civil rights activity. Many of the students who refused to sign attended SNCC’s makeshift “Nonviolent High” in October of 1961, a precursor to the Freedom Schools that closed at the end of the month when a number of SNCC organizers and student-activists were sentenced to jail for “disturbing the peace” (Dittmer 107-13; Carson 48-9).

In addition to the arrests and beatings they had come to expect as civil rights activists in Mississippi, SNCC workers constantly faced the threat of more serious white violence in the state. The September 1961 murder of Herbert Lee, a NAACP volunteer contributing to voter registration efforts, by a white supremacist state legislator effectively brought an end to the voter registration campaign in McComb. When SNCC worker Jimmy Travis was shot and nearly killed in Greenwood, Mississippi the following February, SNCC began seriously reevaluating its efforts in Mississippi. Moses in particular, who had geared most of his efforts toward cultivating local black leadership, became acutely aware of the need to prompt greater media attention—and thus federal intervention—to

the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. This conviction was strengthened as the summer of 1963 brought several of the most widely publicized events of the civil rights movement. On June 10, President Kennedy federalized the Alabama national guard to force the desegregation of the University of Alabama as Governor George Wallace stood by in protest; the next day, Kennedy addressed the nation to call for federal civil rights legislation just hours before Byron de la Beckwith assassinated Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi. Just two months later, the iconic March on Washington marked the culmination of a particularly tumultuous summer (Carson 81-6). The national and even international attention devoted to these events stood in stark contrast to the very limited awareness of and support for SNCC's efforts in Mississippi.

At the end of the summer of 1963, Moses formally penned an analysis of SNCC's progress in developing a durable movement for racial justice in Mississippi. Moses noted that, despite the organization's inroads in a number of locales across the state, the forces of white supremacy remained intractable. "The full resources of the state," Moses wrote, "will continue to be at the disposal of local authorities to fight civil rights gains. ... The entire white population will continue to be the Klan" (qtd. in Dittmer 199).

Such pessimism was reinforced by the difficulty of prompting the John F. Kennedy administration to meaningfully intervene in Mississippi on behalf of civil rights. The Kennedy administration had pledged its support for voter registration projects across the South, believing this limited civil rights agenda would bring the nation less international embarrassment than direct action campaigns such

as the Freedom Rides (Branch). As Mary Dudziak has compellingly argued, federal support for civil rights was largely dictated by Cold War imperatives, a reality that SNCC activists both resented and worked to leverage as they devised plans for Freedom Summer.

### Bringing Mississippi to “White Heat”: The Origins of Freedom Summer

Civil rights groups active in Mississippi founded the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in 1963 as a means of better coordinating their efforts; COFO brought together SNCC, the SCLC, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the NAACP. Operating under the COFO umbrella, SNCC activists devoted the final months of 1963 to organizing a “freedom vote” campaign in Mississippi, a voting initiative designed to undercut the white supremacist claim that Mississippi blacks were simply uninterested in voting (as opposed to being denied a constitutional right through both legal maneuvering and intimidation). This mock election provided the opportunity for over 80,000 Mississippi blacks to vote for alternative candidates—outside of the mainstream state Democratic Party—who supported a civil rights platform.

Beyond proving to the state government and the nation that African Americans in Mississippi were indeed motivated to vote, the initiative served as an important precursor to the broader Freedom Summer campaign in a number of ways. First, and most directly, the freedom ballot campaign of 1963 set the stage for the more formal challenge to the state Democratic Party in the form of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) that would serve as the overarching goal and culmination of Freedom Summer. Second, the 1963

initiative's use of white volunteers to help orchestrate the protest vote proved integral to attracting national media attention to the protest vote in Mississippi and foreshadowed the central rhetorical strategy of Freedom Summer (Carson 97-8; Dittmer 200-7). But most importantly to this study, the freedom vote campaign provides an early example of SNCC's efforts to sponsor alternative institutions in Mississippi. Whereas previous civil rights activity in Mississippi and beyond had been geared largely toward directly confronting the white power structure as a means of gaining access to white institutions, the freedom ballot campaign instead revealed an impulse to circumvent those institutions entirely through alternative sponsorship.

Following COFO's success at state-wide organization in the "freedom vote" campaign, organizers began to envision a larger scale project that would draw national attention to the civil rights struggle in Mississippi during a crucial election year: the 1964 Freedom Summer. Historian Clayborne Carson portrays Bob Moses as a chief architect of this plan:

The experiences of SNCC workers in the South had shown Moses that the only hope for blacks lay in creating a crisis that would force a confrontation between federal and state authority. Since there was little possibility that southern whites would voluntarily make changes in the status of blacks, Moses felt that SNCC's job was to "bring about just such a confrontation ... to change the power structure." He described SNCC's plan as an "annealing process. Only when metal has been brought to white heat, can

it be shaped and molded. This is what we intend to do to the South and the country, bring them to white heat and then remold them.” (Carson 98)

The language adopted by COFO organizers in their “Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer” reflects Moses’s reasoning. “It has become evident to the civil rights groups involved in the struggle for freedom in Mississippi,” write COFO organizers, “that political and social justice cannot be won without the massive aid of the country as a whole, backed by the power and authority of the federal government” (36). From its inception, then, Freedom Summer was explicitly designed to attract the attention of the national media—and thus the federal government. Moreover, Moses and other COFO organizers had learned from the freedom ballot campaign that the media and federal government would be acutely concerned with the descent of several hundred affluent, white college students into a state where a recent upsurge in Ku Klux Klan violence had, to that point, gone largely ignored at the federal level (Carson 98-102; Dittmer 217-20; Hale 74-7).

This controversial strategy, which would become a hallmark of the Freedom Summer project, departed from SNCC’s typical focus on developing indigenous black leadership and was initially met with considerable skepticism from many COFO organizers. When COFO met in Greenville, Mississippi in late 1963 at a workshop sponsored by the Highlander Folk School, debates surrounding the role of whites in the summer project—and the movement more broadly—dominated the discussions. Among those opposed to the greater involvement of whites in the movement, many were concerned that the rhetorical

skills of northern whites could elevate their voices over those of southern blacks and SNCC veterans, a concern that had been borne out through previous experience (Carson 100). Others worried that class differences more generally would lead to a power imbalance that would quash the development of indigenous black leadership. While sympathetic to such concerns, Moses argued for the need to “have white people working along side of you . . . so it isn’t any longer Negro fighting white, it’s a question of rational people against irrational people.” He further declared: “I always thought that the one thing we can do for the country that no one else can do is to be above the race issue.” Former Mississippi sharecropper and civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer agreed: “If we’re trying to break down this barrier of segregation, we can’t segregate ourselves” (qtd. in Carson 99).

As discussions continued over the next few months, Mississippi experienced a resurgence in Ku Klux Klan violence that would tilt the opinion of COFO organizers toward consensus surrounding an expanded role for whites. In late January 1964, the murder of Louis Allen, witness to the 1961 Herbert Lee killing, marked the beginning of a Klan renaissance in the state. By the spring of 1964, even reluctant COFO activists, weary from the months of increased white violence, began to fall in line behind Moses. Significantly, Mississippi blacks also strongly supported the proposed summer project (Dittmer 215-9). As SNCC worker Charlie Cobb later recalled, the local African American community was “very pragmatic. They wanted things to change, and if it took bringing in a bunch

of white kids, OK. Local people were not into all these ideological kinds of things” (qtd. in Dittmer 219).

Ultimately, if reluctantly, COFO organizers recognized that the surest way to bring national attention to Mississippi was to involve elite white youth in the project:

Previous projects have gotten no national publicity on the crucial issue of voting rights and, hence, have little national support either from public opinion or from the federal government. A large number of students from the North making the necessary sacrifices to go South would make abundantly clear to the government and the public that this is not a situation which can be ignored any longer, and would project an image of cooperation between Northern and white people and Southern Negro people to the nation which will reduce fears of an impending race war.

(“Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer” 36)

This strategy, as COFO organizers well understood, would certainly “bring [Mississippi] to white heat” (Moses qtd. in Carson 98).

As COFO began to firm up its plans for Freedom Summer, white Mississippi began to prepare for what was perceived as an “invasion.” Already bristling from the increased scrutiny brought on by the national media in the wake of the KKK resurgence, the state legislature held emergency sessions devoted to passing harsh laws targeting the so-called “communists, sex perverts, odd balls, and do-gooders” that would infiltrate the state that June (Watson 52). Meanwhile, white violence toward blacks in the state continued to escalate throughout the



spring of 1964. John Dittmer reports: “While the Citizens’ Council was busy issuing proclamations denouncing the civil rights bill and urging defiance of school desegregation orders, the Klan and local police were continuing to terrorize Mississippi blacks” (237). The Lyndon B. Johnson administration, tracking the developments in Mississippi while failing to intervene, became increasingly worried that the arrival of hundreds of white volunteers to the state that June would further intensify the violence—fears that were borne out when summer volunteer Andrew Goodman went missing with two veteran civil rights workers at the onset of Freedom Summer.

“Building Up Our Own Institutions”: The Development of the Freedom Schools

Amidst heated intra-organizational debates among COFO activists surrounding the role of white volunteers in Freedom Summer, one idea met with almost unanimous enthusiasm: Charlie Cobb’s proposal that Freedom Summer include the establishment of community “Freedom Schools” across the state. In his “Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi,” penned in late 1963, Cobb lays out the rationale for developing a network of schools unconstrained by the institutional apparatus of public education in the state.

Cobb explains:

It is, I think, just about universally recognized that Mississippi education, for black or white, is grossly inadequate in comparison with education around the country. Negro education in Mississippi is the most inadequate and inferior in the state. Mississippi’s impoverished educational system is also burdened with virtually a complete absence of academic freedom,

and students are forced to live in an environment that is geared to squash intellectual curiosity, and different thinking.

Cobb's claims about the abysmal state of public education in Mississippi, especially for black students, have been corroborated by a number of subsequent historiographical analyses. At the time of the 1954 *Brown* decision, the public schools in Mississippi were among the most segregated and unequal in the nation (McMillen 73). For example, the average salary of a white teacher in Mississippi in 1954 was \$2,177, while the average salary for a black teacher stood at \$1,244. The NAACP's series of "equalization" suits in the 1930s and 40s—the organization's first legal challenges to the "separate but equal" doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson*—had produced only token efforts by the Mississippi legislature to equalize the state's segregated schools. When the *Brown* verdict went beyond equalization to require racial integration, Mississippi officials enhanced their equalization efforts in an attempt to forestall desegregation. Yet by 1964, a decade after *Brown*, white teachers in Mississippi earned on average \$4,321, while black teachers were paid an average salary of \$3,566 (Hale 26-30).

This inequality in teacher pay reflected broader disparities across Mississippi's segregated schools. Jon Hale reports that "black students attending segregated schools between 1954 and 1965 comprised 57 percent of school-age students throughout the state of Mississippi yet received only 13 percent of state funds" (30). The dramatically unequal funding allocated to black and white schools, of course, had a direct material impact upon the lives of teachers and

students. In Mississippi's all-white public schools, new textbooks, school libraries, and bus transportation for students were the norm. The white school year even lasted two months longer than the black school year, which was truncated to support the labor demands of Mississippi's sharecropping system. Black students, by contrast, received secondhand textbooks typically written to advance a white supremacist agenda and rarely enjoyed access to school libraries or bus transportation. Consequently, at the time of the *Brown* decision, only 30% of Mississippi's African American population over the age of 25 had received beyond a seventh-grade education, with just over 2% holding a high school diploma (Dittmer 34-5; 60-1). As John Dittmer notes, by the 1960s, a decade after *Brown*, "outdated textbooks, nonexistent libraries, ... and underpaid teachers" remained the norm in Mississippi's still-segregated black schools (125).

While Cobb's "Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi" notes the particularly abysmal condition of Mississippi's all-black public schools, Cobb does not regard school integration or black access to the state's "grossly inadequate" white schools to be a desirable aim or an acceptable solution. Rather, he proposes that COFO *sponsor* an alternative network of schools operating outside Mississippi's white supremacist power structure: "If we are concerned with breaking the power structure, then we have to be concerned with building up our own institutions to replace the old, unjust, decadent ones which make up the existing power structure. Education in Mississippi is an institution which can be validly replaced, as much of the educational institutions in the state are not recognized around the country anyway" ("Prospectus" 48).

This project of circumventing existing institutions to advance black literacy education—what Adam Banks has described as a “‘third way’ answer to [a] systematically racist exclusion” (2)—aligns COFO’s efforts in Mississippi with a longer tradition of African American “free floating literacy.”

Yet the Freedom Schools also broke with this tradition in significant ways. COFO’s goal of *replacing* existing institutions with new ones, evident in the decision to use the term “schools” to describe their network of educational spaces, required that the Freedom Schools operate without the air of secrecy typically accompanying free floating literacy. Moreover, the use of a white volunteer teaching force introduced into the Freedom School model an interracial power dynamic that would be a hallmark of the project, for better or worse. In an important sense, the availability of this teaching force made the Freedom Schools possible on a state-wide scale; as Cobb notes, “... hundreds of students as well as professional educators from some of the best universities and colleges in the North will be coming to Mississippi to lend themselves to the movement. These are some of the best minds in the country, and their academic value ought to be recognized, and taken advantage of” (“Prospectus” 47). Yet in taking advantage of this “academic value,” the Freedom School model also undercut a central premise of free floating literacy: the exercise of black autonomy through the acquisition of English literacy apart from white influence.

In recognition of this shortcoming, Freedom School organizers advanced a vision of literacy designed to promote black autonomy. The purpose of Freedom Schools, in Cobb’s formulation, would be to “fill an intellectual and creative

vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions. More students need to stand up in classrooms around the state, and ask their teachers a real question” (Cobb). This concept of literacy resonates strongly with the model of literacy developed by Jacqueline Jones Royster in *Traces of a Stream*. Royster defines literacy as the “ability to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time” (*Traces* 45). While COFO organizers were, of course, unconcerned with applying any one model of literacy to their pedagogical efforts, they clearly sought to foster a critical literacy that included a particular orientation to the political world.

Cobb and other COFO organizers saw this critical literacy as integral to advancing the goals of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Indeed, Cobb’s “Prospectus” specifies rather explicitly how COFO would “gain advantage” through its literacy sponsorship efforts. Freedom Schools, as the “Prospectus” explains, would pursue three major goals with respect to Mississippi’s African American youth:

1. supplement what [students] aren't learning in high schools around the state.
2. give them a broad intellectual and academic experience during the summer to bring back to fellow students in classrooms in the state, and

3. form the basis for statewide student action such as school boycotts, based on their increased awareness. (“Prospectus” 47)

Cobb makes clear that the Freedom Schools were not intended to promote literacy for its own sake or even as a means of self-improvement for students. Rather, the Freedom Schools were designed to advance COFO’s goals in Mississippi in very specific ways. Most importantly, COFO workers—in alignment with SNCC’s traditional goals—wanted to create a durable, indigenous movement for civil rights in the state. Cobb regards the training of high school students as imperative to this goal: “I emphasize tenth and eleventh-grade students, because of the need to be assured of having a working force that remains in the state high schools putting to use what it has learned” (“Prospectus” 47). Accordingly, the Freedom School curriculum was designed explicitly to advance the goal of organizing and mobilizing these youth.

On March 21-22, 1964, a group of civil rights activists and professional educators met in New York City to begin developing the Freedom School curriculum. Lois Chaffe of CORE chaired the conference, which was funded by the National Council of Churches (Hale 92). Prominent participants included Ella Baker; Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School; Septima Clark of the Citizenship Schools; Noel Day, a Boston teacher who had previously organized Freedom Schools in that city; Bayard Rustin, a longtime civil rights activist who had worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr.; Howard Zinn, a historian and activist; and Bob Moses. These activists involved did not always share the same understandings of education held by the professional teachers in attendance,

revealing an early example of the tensions surrounding literacy that would be difficult to resolve in the implementation of the Freedom Schools. Sandra Adickes, a New York City teacher and curriculum conference attendee, later recalled feeling “unsettled by the impression ... that at least some of the COFO staff regarded the schools as training grounds for activism, as subordinate to the function of canvassing for voters” (37). These remarks underscore the extent to which the Freedom School model of literacy and political education as inseparable broke with the dominant educational understandings of literacy at the time. Adickes, a socially progressive educator who had volunteered previously for educational causes associated with the civil rights movement, distinguishes several times between the “educational” and “political” goals of the Freedom Schools in her memoir of Freedom Summer.

Yet Adickes’s view seems to have been in the minority at the Freedom School curriculum conference. Taking up Charlie Cobb’s vision of literacy as integral to an activist worldview, conference attendees articulated the relationship between the educational and political goals of the Freedom Schools as follows:

The aim of the Freedom School curriculum will be to challenge the student’s curiosity about the world, introduce him to his particularly “Negro” cultural background, and teach him basic literacy skills in one integrated program. That is, the students will study problem areas in their world, such as the administration of justice, or the relation between state and federal authority. Each problem area will be built around a specific episode which is close to the experience of the students. ... In this

context, students will be given practice activities to improve their skill with reading and writing. Writing press releases, leaflets, etc. for the political campaign is one example. Writing affidavits and reports of arrests, demonstrations, and trials, etc. which occur during the summer in their towns will be another. (“Curriculum Conference Subgroup Report” 49-50)

Freedom School organizers wanted students to gain experience with a range of literacy practices that they associated with full democratic citizenship. By having students write various reports on the events of the summer, organizers wanted students to claim the right to interpret reality—to articulate their own lives and experiences as meaningful and legible to a broader movement audience. But they also wanted students to understand these experiences as the exigence for political action, developing the literate repertoires to translate their assessments of reality into opportunities for political mobilization. In this way, students would gain practice reading—and writing—both “the word and the world,” as Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo have put it.

From this general model of an integrated literacy and civic education curriculum, conference participants decided to pursue a more specific pedagogical approach that they described as “problem-solving through a series of case studies” designed to underscore the “relevant political, economic, and social issues” facing Mississippi (“Curriculum Conference Subgroup Report” 51). The hallmark of this approach was the connection between students’ experiences and the “forces at work in our society” (“Curriculum Conference Subgroup Report” 51). Curriculum designers wanted students to question the



fundamental conditions of their lives, an inherently transgressive act in the context of Jim Crow Mississippi and a fundamental *literate* act underlying the model of literacy sponsored by COFO. As Charlie Cobb put it: “What [students] must see is the link between a rotting shack [in Mississippi] and a rotting America” (61). This understanding of racism as structural and national in scope, Freedom School organizers believed, would inspire students to take up the local work of the civil rights movement.

Accordingly, curriculum conference participants made plans to prepare 14 case studies for the summer’s curriculum; these case studies were later integrated into the “Citizenship Curriculum,” the most developed of the curricular materials for the Freedom Schools. The Citizenship Curriculum made available to the Freedom School teachers in advance of the summer ultimately included seven units, arranged to help students connect their experiences in Mississippi (Unit I) with the black experience in the United States more broadly (Units II-V) before considering the strategies and promises of the civil rights movement (Units VI and VII). The pedagogical goal of this progression was to

... train people to be active agents in bringing about social change. We have attempted to design a developmental curriculum that begins on the level of the students’ everyday lives and those things in their environment that they have either already experienced or can readily perceive, and builds up to a more realistic perception of American society, themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and alternatives offered by the Freedom Movement. (“Citizenship Curriculum” 129)

Consistent with Royster's model of literacy, the Citizenship Curriculum aimed to help students articulate their lived experiences and understand those experiences as bound up in the most complex problems of US society. This formulation of literacy as deeply embedded within a broader social context, which anticipates the New Literacy Studies, characterizes the Freedom School pedagogical approach.

A primary goal of the Citizenship Curriculum was to convince students to stay in Mississippi as changemakers, armed with the realization that the problems of the state were emblematic of the broader racism of US society. Units such as "North to Freedom?"—with its stated purpose of helping students to "see clearly the condition of the Negro in the North, and see that migration to the North is not a basic solution" ("Citizenship Curriculum" 132)—directly advanced this goal. The curricular materials for this unit suggest showing students magazine photographs of skyscrapers and city lights before turning to images of urban ghettos. The curriculum recommends asking students to share their knowledge of relatives' experiences in the ghettos as a segue into a direct comparison of "housing, jobs, schools, [and] health" in the North and South, all directed toward helping students to question: "Are things better in the North? Is the Negro really free, equal?" ("Citizenship Curriculum" 133). Of course, COFO organizers did not intend for these to be truly open questions; the curricular materials for the unit lead students to the inescapable conclusion that migration to the North cannot redress the systemic racism of US society. But through posing questions instead of delivering lectures, Freedom School teachers would

model to students a process of inquiry that organizers hoped would foster students' own questioning of the fundamental conditions of their lives.

Importantly, Freedom School organizers did not intend for teachers to follow the curriculum closely or, in many cases, to follow it at all. Rather, Freedom School coordinators advised teachers to tailor classroom activities to student interests and desires, enacting the Freedom School commitment to empowering students to “articulate their own desires, demands and questions” (Cobb, “Prospectus”). A “Note to the Teacher” preceding the curricular documents mailed to Freedom School teachers prior to Freedom Summer explains the need for a flexible approach:

As you know, you will be teaching in a non-academic sort of setting; probably the basement of a church. Your students will be involved in voter registration activity after school. They may not come to school regularly. We will be able to provide some books, hopefully, some films, certainly some interesting guest speakers—yet other than these things you will have few materials apart from those you and your fellow teachers have brought. In such a setting a “curriculum” must necessarily be flexible. We cannot provide lesson plans. All we can do is give you some models and suggestions which you can fall back on when you wish. You, your colleagues, and your students are urged to shape your own curriculum in the light of the teachers' skills, the students' interests, and the resources of the particular community in which your school is located (“Note” 120-1).

This pre-service note to teachers underscores Freedom School organizers' efforts to translate the limited material resources available to them into a coherent community-based pedagogy. By giving students opportunities to direct their own learning, the Freedom Schools would promote an environment in which Mississippi blacks began to regard themselves as agents in their own lives—a crucial early step toward political mobilization.

Yet these material limitations also foreshadow the difficulty of implementing the Freedom School vision in an institutionalized context, however informal. With a predominantly white volunteer teaching force serving as the primary link between organizers' ideals and black communities in Mississippi, the flexibility of the Freedom School curriculum left teachers with extraordinary discretion over the direction of particular schools. While this discretion undoubtedly benefited both teachers and students in many cases, it also gave elite white college students from the North—most of whom were untrained as educators and largely ignorant of race relations in the South—significant intellectual authority over black communities in the South. This interracial power imbalance—despite organizers' best efforts to combat it—represents an important break between the Freedom Schools and the African American tradition of free floating literacy.

Although the Citizenship Curriculum was never intended to prescribe or proscribe the daily operations of Freedom Schools (as I discuss further in the following section), the curriculum does shed light upon the specific political understandings toward which Freedom School organizers hoped students would

direct their literacy. Two sets of questions frame the Citizenship Curriculum, intended to be “reintroduced periodically” to “permit an on-going evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum, and to provide students with recurring opportunities for perceiving their own growth in sophistication” (“Citizenship Curriculum” 129). The first “basic set of questions” includes the following:

1. Why are we (students and teachers) in Freedom Schools?
2. What is the freedom movement?
3. What alternatives does the freedom movement offer us? (“Citizenship Curriculum” 129)

This question set underscores the explicitly political aims of the Freedom School program; through taking up these questions, students are encouraged to see their attendance of Freedom Schools as directly related to the aims of the civil rights movement. The second question set (referred to in the curriculum as the “secondary set of questions”) pushes students to regard those aims as extending beyond access to white institutions:

1. What does the majority culture have that we want?
2. What does the majority culture have that we don’t want?
3. What do we have that we want to keep? (“Citizenship Curriculum” 129)

With their presumption—radical in Jim Crow Mississippi—that black culture has value, these secondary questions point toward the subversive nature of literacy education in the Freedom School model. Student engagement with these questions was intended to undermine the white power structure’s insistence upon

black inferiority, disrupting the political foundation of Jim Crow and suggesting the possibility of an alternative—one that the civil rights movement offered.

COFO organizers warned Freedom School teachers against assuming that their own understandings of the issues raised by these questions would be more sophisticated than their students'. In her introduction to the "Notes on Teaching in Mississippi" provided to teachers in advance of the summer, SNCC's Jane Stembridge directly charges Freedom School teachers with helping students to harness their experiences of racism into a drive to promote social change, but she also reminds teachers to approach this task with appropriate respect for the embodied knowledge of students: "... there is very little if anything that you can teach them about prejudice and segregation. They know. What you can and must do is help them develop ideas and associations and tools with which they can do something about segregation and prejudice" ("Notes" 61). Freedom School students, Stembridge suggests, would have much experience with "reading the world." The role of Freedom School teachers, therefore, would be to help students develop the academic and literacy skills to translate their lived experiences into actionable political issues, both for themselves and for the movement audience more broadly.

#### "In a Bombed House": Launching the Freedom Schools

Freedom School teachers met with COFO organizers for orientation during the last week of June of 1964. As they gathered for workshops centered around such topics as de-escalating confrontations with white supremacists and protecting one's vital organs during a beating, Freedom School teachers learned

of the disappearance of James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. The seemingly abstract and faraway violence of Mississippi became terrifyingly real as SNCC's Bob Moses confronted the truth in no uncertain terms: "The kids are dead" (qtd. in Branch 374). Moses implored the would-be Freedom School teachers to reconsider their commitment to the summer project in light of this tragic reality.

Meanwhile, on the ground in the Magnolia State, COFO workers scrambled to secure sites and resources for Freedom Schools even as the FBI began what was widely presumed to be a homicide investigation. Jon Hale notes that Freedom Schools met "in spaces well outside and alternative to the public school system. Activists established schools in recognized 'safe' meeting places within the black community—churches, college campuses, storefronts, or homes used by civil rights workers—and they relied upon these places throughout the course of the summer" (97-8). This use of recognized safe places—what Morris L. Nunley calls the "camouflaged spaces and places" known as "hush harbors" (3)—represents another link between the Freedom Schools and the African American tradition of free floating literacy.

The Freedom Schools officially opened their doors—if they had them—during the first week of July of 1964. Over two thousand students went to "school" in church basements, backyards, and other unconventional sites across the state's network of 41 Freedom Schools (Hale 109). While Freedom Summer organizers and volunteers generally believed Freedom School work to be less dangerous than voter registration work, one particular Freedom School site

poignantly illustrates the risk undertaken by both students and teachers devoted to the Freedom School project. The opening of the McComb Freedom School was delayed after white supremacists bombed the structure—a civil rights headquarters known as the SNCC “Freedom House”—that was to house the school. When Freedom School did begin in McComb, students and teachers gathered in the backyard of the Freedom House, adjacent to the blown out building. One of the most notable examples of students writing from the summer captures the political import of this situation. Sixteen-year-old Joyce Brown’s poem, “Houses of Liberty,” expresses: “In a bombed house I have to teach school / Because I believe all men should live by the Golden Rule” (qtd. in Lynd 77).

Other student poetry from the summer and newspapers published by Freedom School students take up similar themes, often pointing to the contradiction between national ideals of freedom and democracy and the lived experiences of African Americans in Mississippi. An editorial from the *Freedom Carrier*, a newspaper published by Freedom School students in Greenwood, MS, succinctly expresses this contradiction:

The Negroes in Mississippi are fed up with life here. We feel that it is time something was done to stop the killings or murders, the prejudice, the mistreatment of Negroes here. Freedom is a very precious thing to any race of people, but in a nation that is supposed to be free and where oppression still exists, something really has to be done. As our forefathers



fought for this nation to be free, we also say to our oppressors “Give us freedom, or give us death.” (“Examples of Student Work” 106)

Connecting their experiences of racism in Mississippi to unrealized national ideals surrounding freedom and equality, the writers of this editorial exemplify the political awareness that the Freedom School curriculum was designed to promote. Indeed, the major theme of this editorial seems to derive from Unit III (“Examining the Apparent Reality”) of the Citizenship Curriculum, which is built around the central concept that “truth, freedom, liberty, equality, and other ideals are often distorted and used as excuses and justifications for contradictory actions” (“Citizenship Curriculum” 134). This work suggests that some Freedom School students indeed came to understand a “link between a rotting shack and a rotting America” and that this understanding inspired them to call for structural changes to US society.

Yet other archival materials related to the Freedom Schools reveal that the implementation of the Freedom School vision may have been uneven across the network of schools. Kirsty Powell, a white teacher at the Ruleville Freedom School in the Mississippi Delta, reports that many of the Ruleville teachers had scarcely read the curriculum and could have benefited significantly from more teacher training at their Oxford orientation (83-4). She describes the Ruleville teachers’ “adherence to the lecture method all the way” as “somewhat unimaginative” (85), suggesting that white volunteers thrust into the highly unconventional teaching situation of the Freedom Schools were not always intellectually or emotionally prepared to enact the educational vision developed

by Freedom School organizers. Powell's report on the Ruleville Freedom School also indicates that Freedom School organizers themselves may have failed to anticipate the schools' student demographics at a number of sites. In Ruleville, the black public high schools were still in attendance during July mornings as a means of accommodating students' work as cotton pickers in the spring. Thus, primarily adults attended Freedom School in the morning, with school-aged children and teens attending from 2-5 pm following the conclusion of their traditional school day (Powell 87). COFO data indicates that this situation also arose at the Holly Springs, Carthage, and Shaw Freedom Schools ("Freedom School Data" 80). This data corroborates educational historian John Rachal's claim that adult education served as a significant function of the Freedom Schools (175).

Beyond suggesting that the full implementation of the Freedom School vision may have been unrealized—and unrealizable—in the context of a summer project with limited funding, however, Powell's report also points to the difficulty of dislodging more traditional and perhaps reductive notions of literacy in institutionalized settings. Although Freedom School organizers articulated a vision of literacy as embedded within an ideological context and inherently political, the Ruleville teachers described by Powell (including herself) seem to have associated literacy more closely with formal and mechanical correctness. Powell describes the Ruleville teachers' early approach to teaching writing as "unstructured ... and perhaps liberating in a way," with students producing "some very interesting, albeit weirdly punctuated and spelled[,] genuine writing, most

revealing of thoughts, feelings and experience” (85). As the summer progressed, Powell relates that Ruleville teachers “did attempt to teach certain structures: form filling, the sentence and with it the period and the capital letter; personal letter; business letter; report of a meeting. I think we were wise to leave this till the end of summer. Though there is great eagerness to learn the proper forms, I think that to have begun this way might have been rather inhibiting” (85). While consistent with the advice given to Freedom School teachers at the summer’s outset, the implication of a break between the “genuine writing” of African American students and an ideologically neutral set of “proper forms” suggests that the model of critical literacy articulated by Charlie Cobb in his “Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program” did not necessarily inform literacy pedagogy across the network of Freedom School sites. In this respect, the use of a white volunteer teaching force, educated to value more traditional notions of literacy, may have hindered the full realization of the Freedom School vision.

Yet other accounts suggest that the relationships that developed between black Mississippians and white volunteers may have marked the summer’s greatest success. Liz Fusco, a Freedom School teacher who would attempt to establish a more permanent presence for the schools as a statewide coordinator during the 1964-65 school year, credits these relationships with helping Freedom School students to understand the promise of the civil rights movement: “Whoever the Freedom Schools touched they activated into confrontation, with themselves and with the world and back again. ... It was the whites, the northerners, listening to the Mississippi Negroes, reading what they wrote, taking

them seriously, and learning from them” (100-1). The Freedom Schools, in Fusco’s assessment, served as a manifestation of the “beloved community” of interracial harmony that the mainstream civil rights movement sought to realize. Significantly, Fusco points to the role of literacy in fostering this sense of community, with northern whites reading and learning from black-authored texts as evidence of black authority over both the word and the world. In other words, through reading and writing practices, the Freedom Schools demonstrated to Mississippi blacks their right to be “taken seriously” (Fusco 100).

Beyond these interracial relationships, however, Fusco also attributes the success of the summer program to the Freedom School curriculum. The curriculum, Fusco writes, enabled students to “see patterns” between their own experiences in the South and a broader national reality. “... [T]he kids,” she writes, “began to see two things at once: that the North was not real escape, and the South was not some vague white monster doomed irrationally to crush them. Simultaneously, they began to discover that they themselves could take action against ... the specific injustices and the condition of injustice—which kept them unhappy and impotent” (99). By helping students to understand their own experiences of injustice as part of a broader social structure, then, the Freedom School curriculum worked to mobilize these students to make demands upon the fundamentally racist system that they had come to see as national in scope. Significantly, as the next section illustrates, many of these demands touched upon literacy sponsorship itself.

“We Therefore Demand”: The Impacts of Sponsorship

On August 4, 1964, the bodies of James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman were discovered in an earthen dam just south of Philadelphia, Mississippi. Two days later, student-delegates from Freedom Schools across the state met in nearby Meridian for the Freedom School convention, designed to be a culminating experience of the summer's educational program. The Baptist seminary in Meridian was large enough to provide housing for 100 delegates, but the political significance of holding the convention near the site where three young men had been murdered for attempting to establish a Freedom School permeated the convention's atmosphere.

The political platform produced by the Freedom School students—designed to become the youth platform of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—speaks to the overwhelming success of COFO's literacy sponsorship in achieving the organization's stated goals. The elaborate, detailed list of demands advanced by the students covers such topics as public accommodations, housing, health, foreign affairs, federal aid, job discrimination, the plantation system, civil liberties, law enforcement, city maintenance, voting, and direct action. But the educational demands set forth by these students merit special consideration for their articulation of the relationship between the Freedom School experience and the still-segregated public school system in Mississippi. The educational platform reads:

In an age where machines are rapidly replacing manual labor, job opportunities and economic security increasingly require higher levels of education. We therefore demand:

1. Better facilities in all schools. These would include textbooks, laboratories, air conditioning, heating, recreation, and lunch rooms.
2. A broader curriculum including vocational subjects and foreign languages.
3. Low fee adult classes for better jobs.
4. That the school year consist of nine (9) consecutive months.
5. Exchange programs and public kindergarten.
6. Better qualified teachers with salaries according to qualification.
7. Forced retirement (women 62, men 65).
8. Special schools for mentally retarded and treatment and care of cerebral palsy victims.
9. That taxpayers' money not be used to provide private schools.
10. That all schools be integrated and equal throughout the country.
11. Academic freedom for teachers and students.
12. That teachers be able to join any political organization to fight for Civil Rights without fear of being fired.
13. That teacher brutality be eliminated. ("Platform" 115)

Significantly, nearly all of the demands articulated by student-delegates concern the conditions of black schools and the educational opportunities afforded by them, with only one mention of school integration. This platform thus suggests that Freedom School students at the end of the summer experience did not regard access to white institutions as a fundamental solution for promoting educational equity for black students. Rather, these students seem to believe

that greater control over the institutional apparatus of black education mattered more than racially integrated schooling; in other words, COFO's sponsorship of the Freedom Schools led students to demand the right to sponsorship itself. In this sense, the youth platform echoes W.E.B. DuBois's famous claim from 1935: "[T]heoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education" (335). Thus, while COFO's efforts to institutionalize the African American tradition of free floating literacy through the Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964 almost certainly fell short of organizers' loftiest aims, the archival record suggests that many Freedom School students did hone their English literacy in "pursuit of other liberties" (Logan 11), including the liberty to demand greater control over their own literate lives.

\*\*\*

Reflecting on his experiences over thirty years after Freedom Summer, Bob Moses frames the history of the Mississippi civil rights movement as "a story of people struggling for greater control over the decision making that affects their lives, of people who learn to step forward to make a demand on society in their own voices" (Moses and Cobb 170-1). This chapter has argued that literacy sponsorship played a significant role in the story of Freedom Summer. By sponsoring a network of schools in which black students would learn to make demands on society in their own voices, COFO illustrated to Mississippi blacks the promise of a movement for racial justice and, in many cases, inspired them to take up the local work of that movement, subverting the politics of Jim Crow in

the African American tradition of acquiring literacy to subvert the intentions of their oppressors.



## CHAPTER THREE

### SPONSORS OF LITERACY?: THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE'S SUMMER COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AND POLITICAL EDUCATION (SCOPE) PROGRAM OF 1965

“It wasn’t a literacy class,” Myles Horton asserted in a dialogue with Paulo Freire when asked about the Highlander Folk School’s most significant contribution to the civil rights movement. “It was a community organization. They were already talking about what they were going to do when they got to vote. They were talking about using their citizenship to do something, and they named it the Citizenship School, not a literacy school” (Horton and Freire 72-3). These remarks, emanating from one of the most important figures in the history of adult education in the United States near the end of the 20th century, are surprising; as Amy Wan demonstrates, the purported link between literacy and citizenship in the US has served as a central justification for literacy education since at least the 19th century. Moreover, given the more invidious history of the white weaponization of literacy to keep blacks from escaping slavery or, later, exercising the franchise, Horton’s comments seem especially dismissive.

A more charitable reading of these remarks, however, might credit Horton with correctly pointing out that literacy—though indispensable for African Americans demanding the right to full citizenship during the civil rights era—was

rarely regarded by activists as an end in itself. Instead, civil rights activists understood literacy education as a means of securing some other political goal, such as voter registration or community organization. The centrality of those political goals—the advantages sought by civil rights activists through literacy sponsorship—meant that literacy learning during the civil rights movement was deeply contextualized, certainly not the imagined transmission of neutral, technical skills associated with the “Old” Literacy Studies that was likely responsible for Horton’s limited conception of literacy.

Previous scholarship has carefully considered the distinction among reading, writing, and related language practices. For example, building from work in the New Literacy Studies that challenges notions of a “great divide” between literacy and orality, Jacqueline Jones Royster develops a model that admits rhetorical acumen as evidence of literate ability. Shirley Wilson Logan endorses Royster’s model as she parses the relationship between literacy education and “rhetorical education,” noting that these “closely associated terms” are “frequently used synonymously” (3). For Logan, “literacy is the broader term, the ground upon which rhetorical education develops. Some manifestation of literacy, then, is implied in one’s rhetorical abilities” (4). Jessica Enoch, however, offers a definition of rhetorical education that inverts the relationship stipulated by Logan, equating rhetorical education with “any educational program that *develops* in students a communal and civic identity and *articulates* for them the rhetorical strategies, language practices, and bodily and social behaviors that make possible their participation in communal and civic affairs. ... [T]his definition

allows for a variety of practices to fall under the category of rhetorical education” (7-8). Specific literacy practices, then, would be subsumed under Enoch’s definition of rhetorical education provided that they entail a communal or civic orientation.

The theoretical frame of literacy sponsorship offers a way to conceptualize these competing definitions as inherent to a phenomenon embroiled in power struggle. That is, by emphasizing the extent to which the value of particular literacy practices is determined by the ever-evolving interests of sponsors, literacy sponsorship as a theoretical frame points to the ways in which what counts as literacy is a moving target. The blurry lines between literacy education and rhetorical education or “political education,” then, are in an important sense a *consequence* of the competing interests of various sponsors of literacy that advance and recede over time. The archival data presented here suggests that such lines may be especially murky in the context of a political movement, in which any literacy teaching is largely incidental to furthering broader political aims.

This chapter traces the political dimensions of sponsorship in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project. SCOPE operated across 120 counties in the South for ten weeks spanning from June to August of 1965. Developed and directed by veteran SCLC activist Hosea Williams, SCOPE has been largely overlooked by the major histories of SCLC and the civil rights movement more broadly. This minimal historiographical treatment of SCOPE can largely be

attributed to Hosea Williams himself; Williams refused to provide his collected papers to the historians conducting the first round of archival research on the movement.

The primary source documents analyzed in this chapter were later collected and published in *The SCOPE of Freedom: The Leadership of Hosea Williams with Dr. King's Summer '65 Volunteers* by Willy Siegel Leventhal, a fellow activist who offered to clean up papers Williams had spilled from his filing cabinet in exchange for the opportunity to curate them. Leventhal's collection includes several newspaper clippings and SCLC memos; fragments of transcripts from the orientation held for SCOPE volunteers in June 1965; a few pages of surveys and letters written by volunteers after the project's conclusion; and a more extensive proposal and budget for SCOPE authored by Williams. These materials are interspersed among other documents pertaining to SCLC and the movement (but not SCOPE specifically) and remembrances of civil rights activists that appear to have been authored by Leventhal.

As with the SCOPE project itself, relatively few references to Williams appear in the major histories of the civil rights movement. Taylor Branch refers to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s affection for Williams, whom King recognized as one of the movement's most effective protest organizers (*Pillar* 124). A biographical entry on Williams published by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University relates that Williams, a World War II veteran, worked for the NAACP in Georgia through the early 1960s before being hired by King to help lead SCLC's efforts in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964. In a

November 1964 letter to a donor, King declared that Williams's "talents need a broader horizon and his energies need to be made available to other communities across this nation" (King Encyclopedia). Shortly thereafter, Williams and John Lewis led the attempted March from Selma to Montgomery that erupted into the police-initiated violence of "Bloody Sunday." Following his work for SCOPE in the summer of 1965, Williams worked as field director for SCLC's Poor People's Campaign in 1968 and was present at the Memphis hotel in which King was assassinated in April of that year (King Encyclopedia).

The archival records for SCOPE are highly fragmented, with few opportunities to triangulate interpretations against established secondary historiography. While historian David Garrow explicitly frames SCOPE as an initiative designed to extend the gains and goals of SCLC's Citizenship Schools (416), the SCOPE archive does not lend itself nearly as neatly to a study of literacy sponsorship as the program Garrow cites as its predecessor. Whereas the Citizenship School program involved direct instruction in reading and writing with the goal of helping African Americans to pass state literacy tests for voter registration, the "political education" component of SCOPE was more nebulous, with only one direct reference to the specific literacy practices entailed in this education (as I discuss further below). Yet the evidence available in the SCOPE archive suggests that Williams regarded this "political education" as resonant with Royster's model of literacy; Williams believed that political education would help African Americans gain insight into their lived experiences as the basis for taking action to address complex social problems.

Accordingly, this chapter argues that the SCOPE project illuminates the political dimensions of literacy sponsorship during the civil rights movement in at least three ways. First, SCOPE demonstrates that an effort to sponsor literacy for political gain in fairly straightforward ways—the Citizenship Schools—created an exigence for another effort at sponsorship in which literacy was more implicit to the specific advantages being sought. Second these advantages are spelled out in the SCOPE documents quite explicitly, providing insight into the particular ends to which SCLC employed sponsorship as a political strategy and clarifying the political dimensions within which the program operated. Finally, the SCOPE project invites us to grapple with the difficulty of distinguishing *literacy* sponsorship from other types of sponsorship—and also from political organization—within a rapidly evolving political context.

#### From Citizenship Schools to SCOPE: Literacy Sponsorship and the SCLC

In August 1954, the Highlander Folk School hosted a weeklong workshop with the theme of “World Problems, the United Nations, and You.” As participants gathered at the school in Monteagle, Tennessee, one visitor from John’s Island, South Carolina didn’t have the UN at the forefront of his mind. Esau Jenkins drove a bus on the predominantly black John’s Island, and several of his passengers had expressed to him their desire to learn to read and write enough to pass the state’s literacy test for voter registration. Jenkins had been distributing portions of the South Carolina voting laws to his bus passengers, helping them to read and understand the laws, but he wanted to do more to secure voting rights for his community (Brown 46).

Another participant at the UN workshop was intimately familiar with the needs of the Sea Islanders. Septima Clark had lived and taught school on John's Island at the beginning of her 40-year teaching career; in fact, Clark had taught Jenkins to read when he was a 14-year-old student on the island. Both Clark and Jenkins appreciated the extent to which literacy served as a barrier to the ballot in the Jim Crow South. But when they approached Highlander founder Myles Horton about starting a literacy education program on John's Island, Horton initially failed to understand what the island's voter registration problem had to do with literacy. As Clark later recalled, "Myles thought that we could just go into communities and get people registered to vote. But I knew that these people have had no schooling, because according to U.S. statistics we had 12 million illiterates in the South. If they were illiterate, with the laws that we had, they would not be able to read enough to register in most southern states" (Brown 52). After a series of heated discussions with Horton, Clark secured Highlander's sponsorship of what would become the largest literacy education program of the civil rights movement (Brown 53).

In early 1957, the first Citizenship School opened on John's Island in an old school house purchased by Highlander. To disguise the purpose to which the building was being put, Jenkins and a group of John's Island residents set up a grocery store in the front room, with citizenship classes taught in the back two rooms (Brown 47). As Clark put it, "we planned the grocery store to fool white people. We didn't want them to know we had a school back there" (Brown 47). Clark's cousin Bernice Robinson, a beautician and dressmaker with no formal

training as a teacher, taught the first group of students on Johns Island. Explaining her own and Myles Horton's confidence in Robinson, Clark later reflected, "we knew that she had the most important quality, the ability to listen to people" (Brown 49). Robinson, in response to the expressed needs of her students, developed a pedagogy that emphasized literacy tasks associated with the exercise of basic citizenship rights. Students practiced writing their names, reading and filling out forms, and reading and interpreting a section of the South Carolina Constitution. All of the voting-age adults who completed Robinson's initial sessions successfully registered to vote the following year (Glen 163).

After the early success of the Citizenship School on John's Island, Highlander established additional schools across the Sea Islands and in Charleston, with similarly impressive results. As historian John Glen recounts, "in 1956 there were only 200 blacks registered on Johns Island, and few of them voted. Four years later there were some 700 blacks registered on the island, and voter turnout was usually almost 100%. [Esau] Jenkins estimated that there were about 5,000 blacks registered in Charleston County in 1954; a decade later, there were nearly 14,000" (166). Robinson and Clark worked to expand the program across the South beginning in the winter of 1960, with Citizenship Schools established in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee in 1961 (Glen 168-9).

At the same time, Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School staff worked to transfer sponsorship of the program to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Highlander lacked the budget to run such a large operation, and the Folk School was embroiled in a legal battle with the state



of Tennessee that threatened the program's continued existence. Additionally, Horton wanted to focus staff energy and school resources on developing new projects rather than operating successful ones (Schneider 133-4). Thus, in 1961, the SCLC took control of one of the most important voter initiatives of the civil rights movement and, indeed, one of the most successful literacy campaigns in US history (Kates). Under the direction of SCLC, the Citizenship School program further expanded its reach across the South.

The success of the Citizenship Schools in advancing one of the most important aims of the civil rights movement—voter registration for African Americans—has been well-documented by scholars in rhetoric and composition (Kates; Lathan; Schneider). But it's important to note that this success did not mark the end of SCLC's literacy sponsorship efforts. While the Citizenship Schools were enormously effective in helping African Americans to pass state literacy tests for voter registration, some activists within SCLC did not regard the Citizenship School program as an unqualified success. SCLC's Voter Registration and Political Education Department, headed by Hosea Williams, seems to have been developed as a response to dissatisfaction with the way newly registered black voters were using the franchise (or perhaps failing to do so). Williams describes the primary objective of the department as “not voter registration, but political education. Experience has taught the Conference that a conventional voter registration campaign may easily be defined as a ‘con-man’s game.’ To just register Negroes means an unintelligent electorate” (162). While it's not entirely clear what he means by a “conventional voter registration

campaign” given the rather unconventional nature of the Citizenship School program or the voter registration drive for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party during Freedom Summer, Williams plainly regards it as his department’s prerogative to cultivate a certain type of black voter. An “intelligent” electorate, he explains, would respond to “issues rather than emotions” (162). In a targeted effort to foster this “intelligent” electorate, Williams proposed and ultimately directed a massive voter registration drive with a significant literacy sponsorship component: the 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project.

In his formal proposal for the 10-week summer project, Williams describes SCOPE as “an attack on the three basic problems of the South, and in particular, on the problems of the ‘Southern Negro,’ disenfranchisement, educational deprivation, and poverty” (53). As a summer voter registration drive with a strong emphasis on education, the SCOPE project had important affinities with the Mississippi Freedom School program of the previous summer. Both of the summer projects employed literacy sponsorship as a means of subverting the existing white power structure of the South to forward the political goals of the civil rights movement. Both programs also entailed bringing in large numbers of white volunteers—primarily college students from the North—to devote a summer to advancing the cause of civil rights in the South. But along with these notable similarities, the particular advantages of literacy sponsorship sought by the COFO organizers of the Freedom School program and Hosea Williams of SCOPE differed in important ways. Whereas COFO sponsored literacy with the

primary goals of organizing and mobilizing African American youth in Mississippi to take up the local work of the civil rights movement in a broad sense, the SCLC-SCOPE project was developed as a means of sustaining the political advantages gained by an expanding civil rights movement.

Below, I argue that SCLC sponsored SCOPE at a critical turning point of the civil rights movement in order to sustain the movement in at least three ways. First, SCOPE served as a targeted effort to extend and sustain one of the movement's biggest political breakthroughs: the Voting Rights Act. Second, SCOPE sought to sustain local civil rights leadership in communities across the South so that these communities could go on to sponsor their own initiatives following the summer project. Finally, as SCLC began to turn its attention northward, literacy sponsorship served as a means of sustaining the movement's political gains in the Deep South while building organizational infrastructure for a broader national movement.

### *Sustaining the "Crawl Space": Political Education and the Voting Rights Act*

Reflecting upon his work with SNCC in the 1960s, Bob Moses distills his experience into two essential elements of grassroots organizing. To organize a community, Moses explains, first entails establishing what he calls a "minimum of common conceptual cohesion" (Moses and Cobb 91) —a baseline consensus surrounding an idea. According to Moses, for SNCC in the 1960s and the civil rights movement more broadly, the concept of "one person one vote" provided

this consensus. But beyond this minimum of common conceptual cohesion, effective organizing also requires what Moses terms a “crawl space,” a “space created in the larger political and social world that we can use to our advantage” (Moses and Cobb 94). The Civil Rights Act of 1957, Moses argues, created a crawl space for SNCC in Mississippi through its creation of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Moses believes that the prospect of federal protection for voter registration workers—limited as such protection turned out to be—provided enough of a crawl space for voter registration workers to wriggle into Mississippi’s white power structure in the 1960s.

The SCLC-SCOPE project provides a pointed example of civil rights activists using literacy sponsorship as a means of sustaining a different political crawl space: the passage of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. As Hosea Williams put it, “we can safely predict that to capitalize upon the Voting Rights Bill ... will change many of the political dynasties of at least 125 of the South’s most segregated counties” (“Proposed Budget and Program” 97). Accordingly, SCOPE was strategically designed to funnel resources to those counties across the South where an increased and better-informed black electorate would have the greatest impact in the wake of the Voting Rights Act.

In his “Proposed Budget and Program” for SCOPE, Williams details the criteria used to select the 120 Southern counties strategically chosen as sites for SCOPE efforts. Most importantly, with the goal of building upon the success of the Citizenship School program, Williams prioritizes counties with a significant population of African Americans unregistered to vote: “There are 900,000

Negroes of voting age population residing in the selected counties. Of that 900,500, only 225,000 are registered, which leaves more than 700,000 Negroes of voting age population unregistered” (326). By focusing resources on areas in which the sheer number of potential black voters could dramatically alter the political landscape of a congressional district, Williams hopes to maximize the electoral impact of the Voting Rights Act.

Of course, many of the obstacles to voter registration that COFO attempted to overcome in Mississippi the previous summer similarly afflicted the selected SCOPE counties. Williams cites the "illiteracy, poverty and disease" rampant in many of the selected counties as major barriers to voter registration, understanding all of these afflictions to be systemically rooted in the fundamental injustice of the Jim Crow power structure. He also frames the brutality and intimidation faced by prospective black voters amidst weak and sporadic enforcement of federal law as a significant issue with which SCOPE workers would have to contend (“Proposed Budget and Program” 311).

While acknowledging these structural impediments to voting, Williams also finds fault with the way already-registered African American voters were using the franchise. Describing the exigence for the political education component of SCOPE, Williams writes:

Numerous counties and cities across the south do not have an acute registration problem but desperately need Political Education. The lack of Political Education in many communities is responsible for the defeat of many qualified candidates, the defeat of white liberal candidates and the

election of Negro "Uncle Toms" or white conservatives. The lack of Political Education is responsible for many qualified Negro candidates and right thinking white candidates failing to seek public office. The lack of Political Education is also responsible for Negroes not receiving their fair, just, and equal share of education, jobs, decent housing, salaries, and justice in the courts. The "un-American-like" treatment that Negroes continuously receive from the local, state and federal law enforcement officers is certainly a result of an uninformed electorate. (*sic*, "Proposed Budget and Program" 312)

Clearly, Williams considers an uninformed electorate to be a central cause of the continued maltreatment of African Americans in the South. Less clear, however, are the links he draws between an uninformed electorate and the specific—and quite disparate—political consequences he lists. In the documents establishing the role of SCLC's Voter Registration and Political Education Department, Williams complains about a superficial identity politics pervading US political life. He frames his department's prerogative as bringing about the day in which "a Negro will not vote for a candidate because he is colored; that a Bostonian will not vote for a candidate because he is Irish Catholic; ... nor can the Wallaces of Alabama be elected because of their brutality to Negroes or their dedication to white supremacy" ("Department of Political Education" 161-2). A similar sentiment may undergird Williams's assertion that a poorly informed electorate leads to "the defeat of white liberal candidates and the election of Negro 'Uncle Toms' or white conservatives." Williams seems to believe that, by

voting based on superficial identity markers as opposed to a more robust understanding of the relevant issues, African American voters contribute to a situation in which elected officials are not meaningfully accountable to their constituents.

Despite his misgivings about the existing electorate, Williams expresses great faith in the power of education to reform the political landscape. By promoting voters' literate ability to understand the root causes of the lived experiences of oppression and to act upon that understanding, Williams believe SCOPE will "liberalize, political philosophy in 120 of the south's most predominantly Negro counties" ("Proposed Budget and Program" 326). Eventually, he writes, such political liberalization "will lead to Negro state representatives, county commissioners, sheriffs and other county officials, city councilmen, police chiefs and mayors. The election of right-thinking city, county, state and national political officials will inevitably result in fair and just legislation" ("Proposed Budget and Program" 326). The three main components of SCOPE—voter registration, political education, and community organization—were devised to extend the gains of the Voting Rights Act toward the realization of this new political reality. Williams expresses great optimism that the program would meet with success: "To make it plain, this program gives the Negro much more than hope" ("Proposed Budget and Program" 326).

Although Williams never specifies exactly how the passage of the Voting Rights Act would create a crawl space through which SCOPE could work to transform the political landscape of the South, central provisions of the bill help to

shed light upon some of the more concrete goals Williams articulates. Most importantly for this study, the Voting Rights Act suspended state literacy tests for voter registration, thereby upending the primary prerogative for the Citizenship School program. Building upon the gains of the Citizenship Schools in the new political climate heralded by the Voting Rights Act, then, required a different approach to literacy education than that advanced by the Citizenship Schools. While the Citizenship School “curriculum” necessarily focused upon those literacy practices associated with voter registration under the regime of Jim Crow—signing names, filling out forms, and reading and interpreting portions of state Constitutions, the SCOPE project was developed with the presumption of federal protection for African American voting rights (although the Voting Rights Act was held up in Congress until early August of 1965 and thus came into effect in the middle of the summer project).

While Hosea Williams never details a program of political education and the archived SCOPE materials provide few explicit references to literacy, one account of a summer political education class points toward a view of literacy as embedded within the practice of first-class citizenship. In an October 1965 letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. written by a summer volunteer and Amherst College faculty member, Hugh Hawkins recounts his experience with the political education component of SCOPE:

We were quite conscientious about giving political education “classes.”

These were not very well attended, but I think some of the message of the workings of the democratic process got across. We tried not to be



pedantic or formal. In one case, the lesson was immediately applied by sending a letter to the area's Congressman urging him to support the voting rights bill. (182)

By writing a letter to a local congressman, the African American citizens described by Hawkins engage in a literacy practice different than those associated with the voter registration imperative of the Citizenship Schools. Instead of learning to read and write as a means of gaining access to the ballot, these citizens anticipate legislation that will provide them with this access, and their literacy practices shift accordingly. In other words, anticipating the forthcoming crawl space to be created by the Voting Rights Act, SCOPE sponsored a different set of literacy practices in pursuit of different political advantages than those sought by the Highlander-SCLC sponsorship of the Citizenship Schools. Whereas the Citizenship Schools aimed to subvert the politics of Jim Crow by operating largely within the strictures of the white power structure, the SCOPE project instead sought to extend and sustain the political momentum driving Jim Crow's demise—the "crawl space" created by the Voting Rights Act.

### *Sustaining Local Leadership*

Consistent with the goal of sponsoring literacy to sustain the crawl space of the Voting Rights Act, Williams insisted that the 10-week summer SCOPE project bolster and sustain local civil rights leadership for the program to be considered successful. To this end, Williams carefully considered the existence of movement infrastructure in a prospective SCOPE county before determining

where to invest SCLC resources. He emphasizes such concerns as "degree of cooperation of local Negroes" and "existence of active affiliates" as particularly important to his decision-making ("Proposed Budget and Program" 311). Like the COFO organizers of the Freedom Schools, Williams stresses the importance of movement infrastructure in establishing the local conditions upon which a successful sponsorship effort could be built. These local conditions included both material and human resources—the sites and relationships needed to launch a targeted, 10-week intervention like SCOPE—along with a broader community atmosphere in which civil rights causes were embraced.

In other words, Williams designed SCOPE to capitalize upon the sustained efforts at both community education and grassroots organizing undertaken by other organizations. Williams frames the summer project as a cooperative initiative between SCOPE workers and those organizations that had already made inroads in selected counties. He writes:

It is to be clearly understood, whether it is the N.A.A.C.P., SNCC, CORE, SCLC or some state or local organization, that whatever organization has established a working relationship with the community, their cooperation will be sought. SCOPE is not to be used to promote expansion of SCLC. Whatever organization in a local community accepts SCOPE, it will be given full authority, without interference, to supervise its activities.

("Proposed Budget and Program" 316)

This emphasis upon cooperation with and even deference to other organizations suggests that a major goal of sponsorship, for Williams, was to promote and

sustain local leadership, rather than to take control over the movement in those communities.

SCOPE's deference to local organizations is especially relevant to this study given that historians have established that many of these organizations were involved in literacy sponsorship efforts of their own during the summer of 1965. For example, SCLC's Citizenship School program operated through 1970, and that program's reach certainly overlapped with SCOPE counties (Glen). Moreover, included in the Leventhal archive are several clippings pertaining to the Selma Free College established by SNCC activists to support students who had been expelled from the all-black Selma College for engaging in civil rights activism. SCLC's sponsorship of SCOPE, then, seems to have been functioned at least in part to enhance local control over literacy and community organization as a means of gaining political advantage in a broader national struggle.

Williams reiterates this particular version of sponsorship in his remarks to summer volunteers at their June 1965 orientation in Atlanta. Speaking to an audience of primarily white college students, Williams stresses the importance of ensuring that black leaders remain at the head of black communities:

Not under any conditions ... do we allow the Negro community to relinquish its responsibility as leaders. Now I tell you that this is something that's very hard to do. This is very hard to do because before you know it, you will be maneuvered into leadership in that community. But I don't care. Under no conditions will you allow the Negro community to relinquish their responsibility. That is to be the leaders and make the final decisions in that

community. ... [Y]ou will do nothing but harm in those communities if you go down and allow yourself to take over the leadership of the program there, of the movement. ("Orientation" 358-9)

These remarks underscore the extent to which sustaining local leadership served as a primary aim of sponsorship in the SCOPE program. Significantly, this vision of sustainability was in place despite the fact that the SCOPE program was explicitly designed to be short-term; student volunteers were asked to devote 10 weeks of their summer vacation to the project before returning to college in the fall. While the program itself was never intended to continue beyond the summer of 1965, the advantages of sponsorship sought by SCLC were crafted to endure well beyond the duration of SCOPE.

To more formally ensure the sustainability of local civil rights leadership, Williams assigned a paid county coordinator to each SCOPE county. These coordinators were responsible for "coordinating the program between the volunteer workers and the local Negro leadership" as well as "seeing to it that the leadership remains in the hands of the local people and that proper supervision at all times will be given volunteer workers" ("Proposed Budget and Program" 314). This concern with bolstering rather than superseding local leadership—a concern shared by COFO organizers of Freedom Summer—underscores the role of sponsorship in organizing and ultimately sustaining durable local movements for civil rights. SCOPE's literacy sponsorship component was designed to set communities up to sponsor their *own* educational and political initiatives following the summer program.

Despite this abiding concern with the sustainability of local leadership, Williams recognized that another major obstacle facing SCOPE was a dearth of existing movement infrastructure in many of the selected counties. In his "Proposed Budget and Program" for SCOPE, Williams expresses concern that a number of the targeted counties lacked strong local leadership: "Since the entire area chosen for political action lies in the Black Belt of the south, it will be difficult or impossible to find experienced, capable and determined local men who are willing to take the risk necessary to lead the project in their county. These counties will require constant supervision and inspiration for at least the first several weeks" (314-5). As in Mississippi, the intimidation and violence directed toward African Americans who challenged the white power structure created a daunting obstacle for effective political mobilization and organization. Thus, in at least some SCOPE counties, sustaining local leadership seems to have first required *establishing* such leadership amidst a broader atmosphere of African American repression.

Surveys completed by SCOPE volunteers following the conclusion of the summer program suggest that the initial aims of literacy sponsorship articulated by Williams may not always have been appropriate to the situation on the ground in SCOPE counties. In particular, the efficacy of using sponsorship as a means of cultivating local leadership may have varied from county to county. In response to a question asking about enduring problems facing particular SCOPE communities, summer volunteer John Sanders of St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina writes: "Leaving a community without strong local

leadership is to me a very serious problem” (171). Volunteer Dave Tanner of Erie, Pennsylvania approaches the issue with greater optimism:

We were the first civil rights workers ever to be in Fairfield County, S.C. As such, we laid some of the groundwork for future projects there (and I hope these will occur). The people there, both white and Negro, learned that “freedom is a’ comin” and they can’t turn their back on it. As a result of our work many of the Negroes there, especially the younger ones, are now ready to take up the burden as many others have already done all over the nation. (177)

In Tanner’s assessment of Fairfield County, SCLC’s sponsorship of SCOPE seems to have served both to create some infrastructure for a local movement and subsequently to have transferred control of that movement into local hands. Although Tanner makes no mention of a continued partnership between SCLC and local civil rights activists, his remarks suggest that a short-term initiative like SCOPE potentially had longer-term impacts in at least one county. In other words, SCLC’s sponsorship of SCOPE may have paved the way for future community-sponsored projects in Fairfield County and elsewhere across the South.

### *Sustaining the Movement*

Both the archived SCOPE documents and the secondary literature reveal that the SCOPE project involved a major investment of resources into the South at a time when SCLC’s primary interests seemed to lay elsewhere. Following the Selma campaign for voting rights in early 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had

set his sights largely upon issues associated with the deep poverty among black communities in the urban North. At the same March 1965 meeting of SCLC leaders at which Hosea Williams formally proposed the SCOPE program, King sought board approval for a more expansive approach to the national and deeply interrelated problems of racism and poverty (Garrow 414-5). "I realize I must more and more extend my work beyond the borders of the South," King said, and "become involved to a much greater extent with the problems of the urban North" (qtd. in Garrow 415). In July of 1965, as SCOPE volunteers fanned out across the southern Black Belt counties selected as sites for the summer program, King traveled to Chicago to join protests against school segregation.

While King's exploration of the racial tensions gripping Chicago certainly did not mark SCLC's retreat from the South, the volunteer recruitment practices adopted by SCOPE seem to anticipate a broader reach for the organization. Instead of directly recruiting student-volunteers for SCOPE, SCLC contacted nearly two thousand colleges and universities to invite them to establish campus SCOPE chapters ("Proposed Budget and Program" 316). King himself mailed a letter to college presidents and chaplains to make this request, and those who responded to King's initial solicitation were added to a SCOPE mailing list. Hosea Williams also laid out plans to send teams of SCOPE workers to travel to "the academic communities of America" to recruit additional volunteers and "establish SCOPE Chapters for the purpose of continuous recruiting and raising funds for the summer project" ("Proposed Budget and Program" 317). Williams proposed stationing eight SCOPE teams across the nation's largest college communities,

with seven teams intended to travel over 10,000 miles each by automobile to reach smaller communities (“Proposed Budget and Program” 317).

By establishing SCOPE chapters across the nation’s colleges and universities, SCLC worked to build a national infrastructure of student-activists ready to take up the work of the movement as it expanded beyond the South. Of course, civil rights groups across the nation had long been fighting for racial justice in communities geographically removed from the Deep South. Through the SCOPE project, however, SCLC took advantage of a political moment in which affluent white students were particularly eager to join the movement. To reach these students, Williams designed three promotional brochures “to appeal specifically to the visual, emotional, intellectual and humanitarian aspects of college students” (“Proposed Budget and Program” 317). The first brochure outlined the SCOPE project, including the selected counties and the number of volunteers required, and appealed to “each student to contribute his summer to the freedom struggle” (“Proposed Budget and Program” 317). This brochure also included a form students could complete to request application materials. A second brochure explicated the political dynamics of the South for students residing outside the region, focusing particularly upon “intimidation and police brutality, poverty, political and economic structures” (“Proposed Budget and Program” 318). The final brochure explained SCLC and the organization’s commitment to nonviolence (“Proposed Budget and Program” 318). This promotional literature, in addition to persuading students to devote a summer to SCOPE, worked to paint a particular image of the South that SCOPE staff could



build upon at their orientation for the summer volunteers. But it also aimed to draw students emotionally into a movement that would extend beyond the South. As summer volunteer Merle Ohlinger of Hunter College in New York later reflected: "Having blasted myself out of a complacency that both I and all who I knew were suffocating in, I will never be the same" ("Volunteer Survey" 172). SCOPE was designed to encourage volunteers like Ohlinger to sustain their commitment to civil rights activism after returning to college following the summer project.

#### Sponsors of Literacy?: Assessing the Impacts of the SCOPE Project

In his brief references to SCOPE, historian David Garrow relates that, in the wake of the summer project, concerns were raised within SCLC surrounding Hosea Williams's use of funds, the behavior of summer volunteers, and whether the program was effective in achieving its stated goals (441). Williams defends SCOPE from these criticisms in a November 6, 1965 memorandum to King and the SCLC National Board of Directors. He writes:

To judge the success of our Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program by comparing the number of dollars spent with the number of Negroes registered would be distorting the facts. Although, statistically speaking, the cost per voter was far cheaper than that of any recorded normal voter registration campaign when other primary accomplishments were simultaneously validated. ... Over 1,200 workers were involved in our summer program; 650 summer volunteers which represent more than 120 colleges and universities, 120 paid SCLC

staff workers and 400 local volunteers. 1,026,457 citizens were involved in SCOPE's political education classes, 666,316 were involved in community organization. Approximately 70,000 Negroes attempted to register, resulting in the registration of 49,302 qualified voters throughout these black belt counties. (*sic*, 96).

Williams speaks here to the difficulty of establishing the specific political advantages gained through SCLC's sponsorship of the SCOPE project. Comparing the program's budget against the nearly 50,000 voters registered, he suggests, overlooks the over one million participants in political education classes and over 600,000 participants in community organization—the less tangible impacts of sponsorship. The precise achievements of SCOPE, Williams seems to imply, may elude numerical measurement.

In a similar vein, I want to suggest that the precise role of literacy in the 1965 SCOPE project may be impossible to parse out. The archival data available indicates that over one million Southern blacks participated in political education classes in which literacy practices were implicated. While the preserved SCOPE materials elucidate very little about those practices, Williams's papers clearly reveal that he conceived of SCOPE as a means of providing literacy education to community members in the pursuit of very specific political outcomes—outcomes that were ultimately difficult to assess. In other words, the SCOPE archive includes many allusions to *sponsorship* and very few references to *literacy*.

But the archive's relative silence *vis a vis* literacy is perhaps unsurprising. As Myles Horton suggests in his dialogue with Paulo Freire, civil rights activists

had little concern with literacy except as a means to their larger political ends. The theoretical framework of literacy sponsorship, when applied in the context of a rapidly evolving political movement, anticipates this attitude toward literacy and potentially provides insight into why materials related to specific reading and writing practices in SCOPE's political education classes seem not to have been preserved. Thus, this chapter ultimately points toward an opening for additional research pertaining to SCLC's SCOPE program. The archived materials collected by Leventhal point to a number of SCOPE volunteers who are likely still living. These volunteers may have materials that could bolster the existing archival record and help to further elucidate the role of literacy in the summer project. Moreover, an interview study with these participants (and other participants with whom they may still be connected) could provide important insight into the specific practices and understandings of literacy that underpinned the "political education" component of SCOPE. This chapter, then, offers the field's first word but hopefully not the last on the role of literacy in SCLC's SCOPE program of 1965.

## CONCLUSION

“It is crucial for an understanding of American educational history ... to understand that within American democracy there have been classes of oppressed people and that there have been essential relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression. Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education. These opposing traditions were not, as some would explain, the difference between the mainstream of American education and some aberrations or isolated alternatives. Rather, both were fundamental American conceptions of society and progress, occupied the same time and space, were fostered by the same governments, and usually were embraced by the same leaders.”

-James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (1)

In the fall of 2017, Amazon announced plans to establish a second US headquarters beyond their established home base in Seattle. Hundreds of city governments across the country promptly prepared pitches and dossiers aiming to lure the retail giant—with its promise of 50,000 high-paying technology sector jobs—to their municipalities. Some of the tactics employed by city governments were unconventional; for example, the city of Tucson, Arizona, mailed Amazon

CEO Jeff Bezos a 21-foot cactus. Yet one promise was consistent across the more than 200 proposals that Amazon received: the assurance of substantial tax credits in exchange for the creation of local jobs (Barbaro).

After reviewing dossiers to much national hype for over a year, Amazon made a surprise announcement: it would split its proposed second headquarters across two locations, providing the company with access to two separate talent pools from which to draw their proposed 50,000 new employees. One headquarters would be established in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, long seen as a frontrunner in the battle to woo Amazon. But the second location came as a bigger surprise to those who had been following the situation closely: the Long Island City area in Queens, New York City—an area of the city that many Americans were unfamiliar with before Amazon announced its decision.

While Amazon was largely embraced by Northern Virginians, the relationship between the corporation and the community in Queens got off to a rocky start. Many Long Island City residents doubted that Amazon would truly serve the needs of community members. These residents wondered why the largest corporation in the world should receive publicly-funded tax incentives, especially given the city's ongoing crises surrounding affordable housing and public transit. Amazon's arrival, these community members feared, would only exacerbate such issues for low-income New Yorkers and especially for residents of Long Island City's Queensbridge Houses, the largest public housing development in the United States (Holder).

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo attempted to quell the situation, insisting that the economic boon Amazon would bring to the city would far outweigh the costs in publicly-funded corporate tax breaks. They cited studies suggesting that the \$3 billion in proposed tax credits for Amazon would ultimately yield \$27 billion in tax revenue for the city—a 9:1 ratio—that would be used to fund affordable housing development and subway improvements. Moreover, de Blasio and Cuomo pointed to the additional businesses that would undoubtedly spring up to serve the needs of tens of thousands of new Amazon employees in Queens as evidence of further gains for the community. But many vocal opponents took to the streets, flooding town hall meetings and demanding that Amazon abandon Long Island City.

Among Amazon’s proposed solutions to the problem was to invest in education for New York City residents so that they could become employable at the headquarters. In other words, Amazon pledged to provide community access to the workplace literacies most valued by the company. Specifically, Amazon vowed to fund computer science classes at New York City public high schools and to partner with LaGuardia Community College, the City University of New York, and the State University of New York to offer a “cloud computing certificate program” for college students (Perez).

Yet community activists in Long Island City remained unconvinced that these educational initiatives would truly benefit the community. Why, they asked, had Amazon failed to consult with community educational leaders before announcing these proposals? Why hadn’t Amazon given these community

members a seat at the table and listened to their concerns? In other words, to frame the issue in the terminology of this dissertation, why was Amazon offering mere *access* to workplace literacies without letting the community play even a small role in the *sponsorship* of those literacies? Amazon ultimately abandoned its plans to establish a headquarters in Long Island City. While the tensions between the corporation and the community extended far beyond the realm of literacy, the central tensions explored by this dissertation were certainly in play: a failure to attend to the history presented here played a role in causing the largest corporation in the world to abandon the site of a potential headquarters.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the history of literacy education as a civil rights issue can be framed in terms of two competing models of educational equity. The first model, exemplified by the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, holds that educational equity consists in minority access to and participation in existing white institutions. The second model, advanced by a number of black intellectuals and activists across a long civil rights movement, positions black *sponsorship* of black literacy as a necessary condition for the meaningful education of black youth and thus a prerequisite for equity. If education for democratic citizenship and education for second-class citizenship have been the two basic traditions of US education, these intellectuals and activists have argued for and pursued literacy sponsorship as a “third way”—as a means of subverting the dichotomy posited by educational historian James D. Anderson. The black sponsors of literacy whose voices are represented here,

despite their differing ideological commitments, shared the conviction that literacy sponsorship could advance black civil rights in a fundamentally racist society.

Yet it's important to remember who these sponsors "were and were not" (Cushman). The contributors to the 1935 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* were intellectual luminaries with elite educational pedigrees. The contributors to the 1980 edited collection *Shades of Brown* were lawyers, university faculty, and upper-level administrators in some of the largest school districts in the country. Bob Moses was a New Yorker who had attended graduate school at Harvard; Charlie Cobb was also raised and educated in the north. While Moses and Cobb were deeply committed to the Mississippi communities they were working to organize, they were not the indigenous southern leaders that SNCC aimed to cultivate. Of all the individuals associated with literacy sponsorship discussed in this dissertation, only Septima Clark and Hosea Williams had come to the civil rights movement informed by their own lived experiences as black southerners; only Clark and Williams did not attend higher education institutions in the north.

In other words, most of the sponsors of literacy represented here were either regionally or educationally removed from the communities for which they advocated and in which they worked. While I do not mean to diminish their good intentions or thoughtful community engagement practices, I want to underscore the distance between these sponsors of literacy and those they sponsored. Consistent with Brandt's model of literacy sponsorship, the sponsors of literacy explored here and those they sponsored likely had different goals and intentions



that they pursued through the sponsorship relationship. Sponsors of literacy, to be clear, do not speak for the sponsored.

The voices of the sponsored are not well-represented in this dissertation. In part, this underrepresentation is (often) a limitation of archival work: the texts most likely to be preserved and archived tend not to be those written by ordinary people, especially when those ordinary people may not have been recognized as “literate” in a traditional sense. Although the model of literacy developed by Royster that informs this dissertation opens up the concept to account for the history of African American exclusion from traditional reading and writing practices, it remains the case that the writing and voices of ordinary African Americans are often excluded from archives. The archives of the civil rights movement, understandably, foreground the voices of activists; these voices cannot stand in for the voices of all black Americans during the civil rights era.

Significantly, the archives explored in this dissertation included little or no writing that had been produced by the sponsored. The archived Freedom School materials available through [educationanddemocracy.org](http://educationanddemocracy.org) contain few samples of student writing. Those samples that are included tend to be extraordinary by the archivists’ own estimation. For instance, Freedom School student Joyce Brown’s poem “Houses of Liberty” appears multiple times in the archive as an example of one of the most impressive pieces of student writing produced during the summer; Brown herself—hardly an average Freedom School student—went on to co-chair the Freedom School convention at the end of the summer and remained deeply involved in the Mississippi civil rights movement following

Freedom Summer. Moreover, the student writing included in the archive strongly affirms COFO organizers' vision of literacy as integral to political activism.

Student writing that does not take up explicitly political themes consistent with the goals of the civil rights movement does not appear in the archive. And however limited a voice the Freedom School archive gives to the sponsored, the SCOPE archive offers none at all.

This underrepresentation of ordinary voices may also point to a broader phenomenon in American political discourse: the loudest, most insistent voices tend to garner the most attention, driving historical and media narratives that do not necessarily reflect the concerns of all community members. While civil rights activists certainly *needed* to make their demands loudly and insistently, it's important to keep in mind that not all black Mississippians who attended the Freedom Schools would have regarded themselves as activists. There are glimpses of the disparity between activists' concerns and community members' concerns in the archives explored here; for example, according to Charlie Cobb, SNCC's internal debates regarding whether to involve white volunteers in the summer project revolved around ideological commitments far removed from the concerns of typical black Mississippians. Relatedly, many Long Island City residents would likely have welcomed the job opportunities and tax revenue generated by an Amazon headquarters; their voices were drowned out by those protesting against the corporation.

Nonetheless, the black intellectuals and civil rights activists whose voices I have represented in this dissertation compellingly make the case that black

access to and participation in white institutions cannot solve the problem of inequity in fundamentally racist society. Instead, they argued for and pursued black sponsorship of black literacy outside the purview of white institutions. While those of us associated with such institutions may be unable to follow the precise course laid out by these civil rights activists, we can similarly seek a “third way,” leveraging the resources of existing institutions toward community-driven ends. Indeed, a significant body of research surrounding community engagement grapples with these same issues, and the history presented here can productively inform community engagement practices—lest we encounter problems akin to those faced by Amazon.

This history also reveals that several concepts central to rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies circulated among black intellectuals and activists well before they were articulated by scholars in these fields. Most significantly, arguments for black sponsorship of black literacy have informed discussions of literacy as a civil rights issue since at least the 1930s. But more broadly, the understanding of literacy as ideological typically associated with the scholarly turn toward the New Literacy Studies in the 1980s informed the work of black activists well before then. Historians of rhetoric and composition might further consider the ways in which other now-foundational theories and terms circulated in different historical and political contexts before they were taken up in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies. Such historical inquiry may be especially important as we strive to better serve students and communities of color and confront the “stubbornly persistent” color line.

## REFERENCES

- Adickes, Sandra. *The Legacy of a Freedom School*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Alexander, Kara Poe. "Reciprocal Literacy Sponsorship in Service-Learning Settings." *Literacy in Composition Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, pp. 21-48.
- Allen, Danielle S. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. U of Chicago P, 2004.
- Anderson, James D. *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Banks, Adam J. *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*. NCTE, 2006.
- Bell, Derrick. "Brown and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma." In Bell, pp. 91-106.
- , ed. *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation*.
- . *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. Oxford UP, 2004.
- Berlin, James A. *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Southern Illinois UP, 1987.
- Bond, Horace Mann. "The Extent and Character of Separate Schools in the United States." *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1935, pp. 321-327.
- Branch, Taylor. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*. Simon and Schuster, 1998.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- . "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165-185.

- Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*. Africa World Press, 1990.
- Bunche, Ralph J. "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups." *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1935, pp. 308-320.
- Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Harvard UP, 1981.
- Christoph, Julie Nelson. "Sponsoring Education for All: Revisiting the Sacred/Secular Divide in Twenty-First Century Zanzibar." In Duffy et al., pp. 79-96.
- Clark, Septima. *Echo in My Soul*. E.P. Dutton, 1962.
- Cobb, Charles. "Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi." In Emery et al., pp. 47-50.
- Connors, Robert. *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. U of Pittsburgh P, 1997.
- Council of Federated Organizations. "Citizenship Curriculum." In Emery et al., pp. 129-178.
- . "Curriculum Conference Subgroup Report." In Emery et al., pp. 51-56.
- . "Notes on Teaching in Mississippi." In Emery et al., pp. 60-65.
- . "Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer." In Emery et al., pp. 35-40.
- Cornelius, Janet Duitsman. *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South*. U of South Carolina P, 1991.
- Cushman, Ellen. "Elias Boudinot and the *Cherokee Phoenix*: The Sponsors of Literacy They Were and Were Not." In Duffy et al., pp. 13-29.
- Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. U of Illinois P, 1994.
- DuBois, W.E.B. "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1935, pp. 328-35.
- Duffy, John, et al. *Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing and Research after Literacy in American Lives*. Southern Illinois UP, 2014.

- Ellis Miller, Elizabeth. "Remembering Freedom Songs: Repurposing an Activist Genre." *College English*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2018, pp. 50-72.
- Emery, Kathy, Sylvia Braselmann, and Linda Gold, eds. "1964 Platform of the Mississippi Freedom School Convention." In Emery et al., pp. 113-118.
- . "Examples of Student Work." In Emery et al., pp. 103-107.
- . *Freedom School Curriculum: Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964*, 2004. Available at [www.educationanddemocracy.org](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org)
- Engelson, Amber. "The 'Hands of God' at Work: Negotiating between Western and Religious Sponsorship in Indonesia." *College English*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2014, pp. 292-314.
- Enoch, Jessica. *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911*. Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
- Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
- Fox, Tom. *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*. Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. "The Status of the Negro in the American Social Order." *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1935, pp. 293-307.
- Freire, Paulo, and Donaldo Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Bergin and Garvey, 1987.
- Fusco, Liz. "Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964." In Emery et al., pp. 97-102.
- Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. Quill/William Morrow, 1986.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Afterword." In Duffy et al., pp. 227-9.
- . "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1994, pp. 75-92.
- Gilyard, Keith. "African American Contributions to Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 626-644.
- Glen, John M. *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962*, UP of Kentucky, 1988.

- Goggin, Peter, and Elenore Long. "The Co-Construction of a Local Public Environmental Discourse: Letters to the Editor, Bermuda's *Royal Gazette*, and the Southlands Hotel Development Controversy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 5-24.
- Gold, David. *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873-1947*. Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
- Goldblatt, Eli. *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. Hampton P, 2007.
- , and David Jolliffe. "The Unintended Consequences of Sponsorship." In Duffy et al., pp. 127-135.
- Hale, Jon N. *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*. Columbia UP, 2016.
- Hall, Jacqueline Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1233-1263.
- Hawkins, Hugh. "Letter to Dr. King." In Leventhal, pp. 181-2.
- Higgins, Lorraine, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower. "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 9-43.
- Horton, Myles, and Paulo Freire. *We Make the Road By Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Temple UP, 1990.
- Jacobs, Dale. "The Man Called 'Nova': Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal - Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2007, pp. 180-205.
- Kates, Susan. "Literacy, Voting Rights, and the Citizenship Schools in the South, 1957-70." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2006, pp. 479-502.
- Kluger, Richard. *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Social Equality*. Vintage, 2004.
- Kynard, Carmen. *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies*. SUNY P, 2013.

- Lamos, Steve. *Interests and Opportunities: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2011.
- Lathan, Rhea Estelle. "Testimony as a Sponsor of Literacy: Bernice Robinson and the South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Program's Literacy Activism." In Duffy et al., pp. 30-44.
- Lebduska, Lisa. "Literacy Sponsorship and the Post-9/11 GI Bill." *Literacy in Composition Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp. 1-16.
- Leventhal, Willy Siegel, ed. *The SCOPE of Freedom: The Leadership of Hosea Williams with Dr. King's Summer '65 Student Volunteers*. Challenge Press, 2005.
- Logan, Shirley Wilson. *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth Century Black America*. Southern Illinois UP, 2008.
- Long, Elenore. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2008.
- Long, Howard Hale. "Psychogenic Hazards of Segregated Education." *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1935, pp. 336-50.
- MacDonald, Michael T. "Emissaries of Literacy: Representations of Sponsorship and Refugee Experience in the Stories of the Lost Boys of Sudan." *College English*, vol. 77, no. 5, 2015, pp. 408-428.
- McMillen, Neil R. *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*. U of Illinois P, 1989.
- Moses, Robert P., and Charles E. Cobb, Jr. *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. Beacon Press, 2001.
- Moulder, M. Amanda. "Cherokee Practice, Missionary Intentions: Literacy Learning Among Early Nineteenth-Century Cherokee Women." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2011, pp. 75-96.
- Nunley, Vorris L. *Keepin' It Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*. Wayne State UP, 2011.
- Orfield, Gary, and Chungmei Lee. "Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?" The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 2004.
- Parks, Stephen. *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language*. NCTE, 2000.



- . *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*. Syracuse UP, 2010.
- Patterson, James T. *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*. Oxford UP, 2001.
- Pavia, Catherine Matthews. "Literacy Sponsorship of the 'My Online Friends' Discussion Board: Competing and Complementary Relationships." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 30, 2013, pp. 132-145.
- Pedersen, Anne-Marie. "Negotiating Cultural Identities through Language: Academic English in Jordan." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2010, pp. 289-310.
- Pitcock, Ronald L. "'Let the Youths Beware!' The Sponsorship of Early 19th-Century Native American Literacy." *Written Communication*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2000, pp. 390-426.
- Powell, Kirsty. "A Report, Mainly on the Ruleville Freedom School." In Emery et al., pp. 83-96.
- Prendergast, Catherine. *Literacy and Racial Justice*. Southern Illinois UP, 2003.
- . "Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1998, pp. 36-53.
- Pritchard, Eric Darnell. "'Like signposts on the road': The Function of Literacy in Constructing Black Queer Ancestors." *Literacy in Composition Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 29-56.
- Rachal, John. "We'll Never Turn Back: Adult Education and the Struggle for Citizenship in Mississippi's Freedom Summer." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1998, pp. 167-198.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. U of North Carolina P, 2003.
- Roozen, Kevin. "From Journals to Journalism: Tracing Trajectories of Literate Development." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2009, pp. 541-572.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2000.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Jean Williams. "History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies."

- College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 563-584.
- Schneider, Stephen A. *You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932-1961*. U of South Carolina P, 2014.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "CCCC's Role in the Struggle for Language Rights." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 3, 1999, pp. 349-376.
- . *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference. "Questionnaire for SCOPE Volunteers." In Leventhal, pp. 171-81.
- Street, Brian V. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Stuckey, J. Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy*. Boynton/Cook, 1991.
- Tomlinson, Elizabeth C. "Mediation and Legal Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, pp. 75-100.
- Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. NCTE, 1993.
- . "On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 645-661.
- Wan, Amy. *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Education in Anxious Times*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2014.
- Webb-Sunderhaus, Sara. "A Family Affair: Competing Sponsors of Literacy in Appalachian Students' Lives." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007.
- Williams, Hosea. "Memo to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." In Leventhal, pp. 96-103.
- . "Proposed Budget and Program for SCOPE." In Leventhal, pp. 305-337.
- Woodson, Carter G. *The Miseducation of the Negro*. 1933.
- Yi, Youngjoo, and Alan Hirvela. "Technology and 'Self-Sponsored' Writing: A Case Study of a Korean-American Adolescent." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 27, 2010, 94-111.

## CURRICULUM VITA

Name: Jaclyn Hilberg

Department of English  
315 Bingham Humanities  
Louisville, KY 40292  
(865) 312-2105 · jaclyn.hilberg@louisville.edu

### **EDUCATION**

**PhD in Rhetoric and Composition** (2019)  
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

**MA in English** (2015)  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN

**BA in History** (2011)  
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA

### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

---

**University of Louisville** (2016-2019)  
English 101: Introduction to College Writing  
English 303: Science and Technical Writing  
English 306: Business Writing

**University of Tennessee** (2014 –2016)  
English 101: Introduction to College Writing  
English 102: Intermediate College Writing

### **TUTORING EXPERIENCE**

---

*Volunteer Writing Tutor*, Family Scholar House, Louisville, KY (2017 – 2019)

*English Tutor*, Educational Advancement Program, University of Tennessee  
(2013 – 2016)

*Writing Tutor*, University Writing Center, University of Tennessee (2013 – 2014)

## **RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE**

---

*Research Assistant*, Dr. Bruce Horner, Endowed Chair in Rhetoric and Composition, University of Louisville (2017- 2019)

*Assistant Director of Student Housing*, University Honors College, University of Pittsburgh (2011 – 2013)

## **UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

---

*Peer Mentor*, Department of English, University of Louisville (Winter 2018)

*Archival Researcher*, Cave Hill Cemetery, Louisville, KY (2016 - 2017)

*Mentor Teacher*, Department of English, University of Tennessee (2015)

## **PUBLICATIONS**

---

“Segregated Spaces and Translingual Pedagogy,” accepted chapter for the edited collection *Racing Translingualism in Composition: Toward a Race-Conscious Translingualism*, edited by Karen Rowan and Tom Do.

“Bringing Racism to Matter,” in *Writing Future Matters*, edited by Mary P. Sheridan and Rick Wysocki, Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2018.

“Extra Breadth and Depth in Undergraduate Education: The Institutional Impact of an Interdisciplinary Honors Research Fellowship,” article co-authored with Nathan Hilberg, *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, Fall/Winter 2011.

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

---

“‘Freedom is a Struggle’: The Performance of Citizenship in the Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. Pittsburgh, PA: March 2019.

“Archival Matters in Literacy Research.” Thomas R. Watson Conference. Louisville, KY: October 2018.

“Reinventing the West End: Rewriting Public Memory in Louisville, Kentucky.” Rhetoric Society of America. Minneapolis, MN: June 2018.

“Beyond Transfer: New Approaches to Valuing the Work of Composition.”  
Conference on College Composition and Communication. Kansas City, MO:  
March 2018.

“Structural Transformations of the Twittiverse: Online Counterpublics and the  
Realignment of the American Political Landscape.” Thomas R. Watson  
Conference. Louisville, KY: October 2016.

## **HONORS AND AWARDS**

---

- University Fellowship, University of Louisville (2016-2017)
- Outstanding Tutor Award, University of Tennessee Writing Center (2014)
- Graduate School Fellowship, University of Tennessee (2013-2014)
- Phi Beta Kappa (2011)
- Brackenridge Summer Research Fellowship, University of Pittsburgh (2009-2011)
- Chancellor’s Scholarship, University of Pittsburgh (2007-2011)