

**Liberation Culture:  
African American culture as a  
political weapon in the 1960s  
Civil Rights Movement.**

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## **Synopsis**

This thesis addresses the use of African American culture as a political weapon in the 1960s civil rights movement. It argues that African American culture was an important weapon for the movement and focuses on how the three major 1960s civil rights organisations – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – engaged with cultural forms such as song, theatre, literature and art. It also examines smaller groups, such as the Free Southern Theater, the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project, the Black Panther Party and Us, and important individuals such as Guy Carawan, Robert F. Williams, Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X. A particular concern of the thesis is the role that education played in spreading the civil rights movement's message. Although based in historical method, it is also grounded in cultural theory, addressing Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony and oppositional culture and incorporating ideas of identity and memory.

It presents SNCC's 1964 Summer Project as a central event of the civil rights movement, where the relationship between education, culture and the movement peaked. In doing so, the thesis addresses the periodisation of the movement, suggesting that 1964 be interpreted as the turning point of the movement. Implicit in the thesis is the relationship between the civil rights organisations and the North. The thesis argues that the movement started to look north prior to 1965. It suggests that African American culture proved to be a unifying force between the 'Civil Rights' and 'Black Power' eras and examines events and individuals that straddled both periods. It therefore proposes that the relationship between these historical phenomena be re-examined and that Black Power be reassessed as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement.

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Joe

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# Introduction

On 14 August 1967, Aretha Franklin performed at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) tenth anniversary banquet in Atlanta, Georgia and was presented with an award, conferring the SCLC's approval of her work for the civil rights movement. Five months later, the city of Detroit celebrated Aretha Franklin Day. Franklin performed in the city's Cobo Hall for an audience of 11,000 before announcing the appearance of a surprise guest. The crowd rose in appreciation of a visibly exhausted Martin Luther King. Laryngitis ensured that King's voice was absent, but his awarding of the SCLC's Drum Beat Award to Franklin spoke volumes about the relationship between the civil rights movement and African American culture.<sup>1</sup>

Franklin's massive hit 'Respect' was primarily a song about personal respect in the domestic sphere but, through her inspired interpretation, it became a 'soaring cry of freedom.'<sup>2</sup> Less tritely, in the charged atmosphere of 1967, the song took on political connotations related to the civil rights movement. For *Ebony*, the song was as good as 'the new Negro national anthem.'<sup>3</sup> In black music expert Rickey Vincent's opinion, 'as a metaphor for an entire people's frustrations and dreams, "Respect" was *it*.'<sup>4</sup> Although it took a few more years for Franklin to articulate her interpretation of African American radicalism, it is clear from the reactions to her music that its message was

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<sup>1</sup> SCLC press release, 2 August 1967. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 3 reel 10 frame 0530; Aretha Franklin and David Ritz, *Aretha: From These Roots* (New York: Villard, 1999) p. 118; Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing In The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 209-212.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (London: Penguin, 1986) p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> Phyl Garland, 'Aretha Franklin – "Sister Soul"' *Ebony* October 1967 p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) p. 123. Emphasis in original.

being interpreted in more abstract terms than she intended. The historian Craig Werner believes that 'Respect' defined the moment that indicated the civil rights movement's shift from King's interracial coalition to the more radical polemic of the Black Power generation.<sup>5</sup> Franklin was known in movement circles for her generosity towards civil rights workers: Stanley Wise of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) remembered that she often handed out free tickets to her concerts to SNCC members.<sup>6</sup> It might be that, in aligning themselves with her, King and the SCLC were ensuring that Franklin was publicly associated with their work rather than that of the more youthful elements in the civil rights movement.

From a certain perspective, it might seem that King was simply cashing in on Aretha Franklin's popularity. King was becoming increasingly alienated from the federal government as a result of his condemnation of the Vietnam war and was struggling to build bridges in the northern black community after the failure of the SCLC's Chicago campaign. King and the SCLC needed to re-establish themselves as an organisation with national appeal at a time when the nonviolent movement seemed to be at the mercy of the Black Panther Party's guns and Stokely Carmichael's furious oratory. Franklin's popularity in the northern urban centres was therefore a ripe opportunity for the SCLC to attract much-needed youth appeal and illustrate its national programme. So the presentation might reflect the SCLC's attempt to capture the *zeitgeist* and underline its radical credentials.

Adding to the complexity of King's meeting with the Queen of Soul is the fact that King was a good friend of Miss Franklin's preacher father, the Reverend C. L. Franklin, pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit. His preaching was considered so unearthly that two nurses were always on hand to tend to overcome parishioners. Indeed, Franklin was not averse to politicising the Word – not least

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998) p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Wise cited in Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998) p. 400.

because his church was only four blocks from Albert Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna and one mile away from the Nation of Islam's Mosque Number 1, where Malcolm X often spoke.<sup>7</sup> Aretha Franklin herself was a devout Christian who had spent many childhood days traversing the country with her father's gospel caravan. She was candid about her musical influences, telling *Time*, 'my heart is still there in gospel music. It never left.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in commenting on *Amazing Grace*, her 1972 return to gospel music, Franklin mentioned that 'it took me back to the original source of my musical inspiration... Church is as much as me as the air I breathe.'<sup>9</sup> Within this context, the meeting between King and Franklin takes on a more religious air and illustrates the centrality of African American Christianity to the movement.

King's interaction with Franklin suggests much about the relationship between the civil rights movement in the 1960s and African American culture. It also poses a number of questions that demand attention: did the SCLC conclude that an association with popular culture was necessary? If so, when? How did its view of Christianity influence its decision? How deeply then did it engage with popular culture? Was it a calculated attempt to attract a youth constituency, or was there a deeper relationship? If the SCLC was prepared to utilise popular culture, what about the other major civil rights organisations: what was their relationship with African American culture? Given the strong bond between the Black Power movement and African American culture, how does the cultural aspect of the 'moderate' movement relate to the growth of Black Power? Might culture be a battleground between the moderates and the radicals? Few historians have engaged with these questions.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Lady Soul: Singing It Like It Is' *Time* 28 June 1968 p. 63, Smith, *Dancing* p. 56, Nick Salvatore, 'Reverend C. L. Franklin and Political Activity in Detroit, 1954-1970' conference paper delivered at Southern Historical Association annual conference, Baltimore, 8 November 2002, author's notes; Nick Salvatore, letter to author, 11 March 2003. Both in author's collection.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin quoted in 'Lady Soul' p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha* p. 150. See also comments from the Reverend C. L. Franklin on Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace: The Complete Recordings* (Los Angeles: Rhino CD, 1999) disc 2 track 11: 'if you wanna know the truth, she has never left the church!'

## Concept

This study actively engages with these questions and assesses how the major civil rights organisations of the 1960s attempted to utilise African American culture as a political weapon. In doing so it also addresses the issue of the periodisation of the civil rights movement. Recent studies have suggested that the historiographical tradition of separating the 'Civil Rights' and 'Black Power' movements into separate phenomena has severe limitations.<sup>10</sup> They suggest that historians re-examine the relationship between 'Civil Rights' and 'Black Power' in order to resist the temptation to de-historicise and exceptionalise the latter. In addressing the issue of culture, this study adds to this debate, suggesting that we examine both the immediate roots of the resurgence of black nationalism in the late 1960s and the moderate reaction to its challenge.

Many studies separate black nationalists from the civil rights organisations that emerged through the nonviolent interracial movement and conclude that the former drew most influence from Malcolm X.<sup>11</sup> This conclusion has implications for our understanding of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. It suggests that the turning point of the entire movement was the death of Malcolm X in February 1965. The massive legislative success of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the symbolism of the Watts Riot also act as historical indicators of the end of one era and the beginning of another. The Voting Rights Act is often interpreted as the last major piece of civil rights

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'Broadening Our View of the Civil-Rights Movement' *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 27 July 2001, <http://chronicle.merit.edu/weekly/v47/i46/46b00701.htm> (23/7/01); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) pp. 307-308, *passim*; Jenny Walker, 'Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Civil Rights and Black Power Era' (PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 2000); Brian Ward, 'Forgotten Wails and Master Narratives: Media, Culture, and Memories of the Modern African American Freedom Struggle' in Brian Ward (ed.), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) pp. 1-13. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (eds.), *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave, 2003) continues this theme but was published too late for assessment within the present study.

<sup>11</sup> William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Clayborne Carson, 'Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era' in Brian Ward and Tony Badger (eds.), *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) pp. 115-127.

legislation that the civil rights movement precipitated. Watts signifies the transformation of the movement from a predominantly southern, rural and nonviolent movement to a northern, urban and violent one. These conclusions tend to exceptionalise the Black Power movement and split the 'moderate' movement from its more radical successor, removing agency from civil rights activists and placing it solely in the hands of external influences. It suggests that the changing of the civil rights era came about as a result of the actions of the Johnson administration, rather than as a development within the movement itself. In splitting 'Black Power' from 'Civil Rights' this also ignores the fact that both SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) embraced Black Power in the wake of Malcolm X's death before their integrationist members resigned or were expelled. It prevents a full appreciation of the SCLC's conclusion that it had to adopt a more radical pose to prevent it becoming an irrelevant organisation. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that these organisations were beginning to turn their focus to the North prior to 1965.

Given that William L. Van Deburg argues that the Black Power movement was 'essentially cultural' it is surprising that so few scholars have examined the relationship between the three major activist organisations in the civil rights movement and African American culture.<sup>12</sup> In reconciling 'Civil Rights' with 'Black Power', culture is an important area for debate and analysis, particularly given the focus of the earlier movement on a physical and psychological release from racial oppression. Thus the issue of African American identity becomes a debate within the civil rights movement. Ignoring the relationship between the earlier movement and African American culture further de-historicises Black Power. Van Deburg has made an admirable investigation into the role that culture made in the Black Power era, but his approach de-emphasises the use of culture as a weapon of struggle; rather he suggests that, for many Black Power advocates, becoming cultural was an end in itself. Van Deburg aside, current

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<sup>12</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day* p. 9. See also Carson, 'Rethinking' pp. 121-126.

writing generally marginalises the use of culture within this setting.<sup>13</sup> The present study will include a consideration of the same relationship, but from a different perspective:

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<sup>13</sup> Generally, civil rights historiography focuses on social and political history. King-centric studies, such as those of Garrow and Branch tend towards a political history approach. Organisational studies understandably have a socio-political focus. Clayborne Carson notes that SNCC became paralysed by its argumentative members after the 1964 Summer Project. African American identity is important to Carson's interpretation. Civil rights biographies tend to bypass cultural issues in favour of the grand narrative, although Mary King's text is leavened with freedom song quotes. Recent local studies include a more nuanced appreciation of the role that culture played in defining local people's responses to black activism. Charles Payne's social history of the Mississippi movement contains a subtle appreciation of the culture of the movement – indeed, its title derives from a movement spiritual – but he chooses not to emphasise the issue and de-emphasises the importance of the freedom schools. Adam Fairclough notes that the Creole heritage helped to define the history of the Louisiana movement, acknowledging the powerful impact of identity on the movement. Recent biographical works have similarly emphasised the deep cultural roots that connect the explosion of civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s with long term organising influences. Timothy Tyson's biography of Robert F. Williams expertly illustrates this linkage.

Most histories include an acknowledgement of the power of the freedom songs but studies that go further are rare. Bernice Johnson Reagon offers a useful survey of the role that music played in the movement but ends her study in 1965. Kerran Sanger improves on Reagon's analysis and focuses on the effects of the songs on the singers but has a similar chronology. Guy and Candie Carawan provide scores and lyrics to the freedom songs and include songs from the radical period. Brian Ward presents an in-depth study of the role of black popular music in developing racial consciousness during the civil rights era. He concludes that popular music was afforded little priority as an educational or mobilising tool by the civil rights organisations. Suzanne Smith's local study of Detroit integrates black culture with the civil rights movement but does not expand the model outside Motown.

Culture, though, is not only music. The eternally controversial Harold Cruse offers a few insights into the relationship between high culture (literature, jazz music and theatre) and black radicalism. Richard King provides a more cogent intellectual history. Carol Polsgrove suggests that literature played an important role in defining the mood of the movement between 1954 and 1963 but skims over the following two years and ignores events after the Voting Rights Act. Morris Dickstein's cultural history of the 1960s gives the movement short shrift. Howard Brick is similarly brief. The culture of Black Power receives more attention, perhaps because of William Van Deburg's *New Day In Babylon*. Van Deburg's work tends to be uncritical of its sources but offers an interesting perspective on the centrality of culture to Black Power. Amiri Baraka has two very different biographies that situate black culture at the centre of the radical movement. Biographies of Malcolm X tend to focus on his political development. The historiography of the Black Panther Party (BPP) is hamstrung by constant bickering over the BPP's nefarious and/or altruistic identities. Scot Brown's history of Us deliberately de-emphasises cultural nationalism. None of these studies link 'Black Power' with 'Civil Rights'.

Taken as a whole, the histories of the civil rights movement in the 1960s suggest that culture played an important role in the Black Power period but was more or less sublimated during the Civil Rights period. While the more perceptive studies indicate the importance of identity and resist the temptation to compartmentalise the phases of the movement, few delve deeply into the relationship between the civil rights organisations and African American culture. Suzanne Smith's study focuses solely on Detroit and Brian Ward's primary interest is in the relationship between the music and black consciousness, rather than with the movement itself. Thus a gap exists between African American culture in the 1960s and the civil rights organisations.

David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1988); Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998). Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) are the most useful organisational studies. Representative civil rights biographies are James Farmer, *Lay Bare The Heart: An*

how the civil rights movement engaged with culture and how it used African American culture as a political weapon. It also extends the chronology to include the civil rights organisations' history after the death of Malcolm X, thus historicising the Black Power era. By placing Black Power within its immediate historical context, the impact of the civil rights movement's experience of the 1960s comes into focus. This enables a deeper appreciation of the development of the African American freedom struggle as it grappled with 1960s liberalism and conservatism. It prevents a glib assessment of Black Power as a nihilistic, violent reaction to the failures of the civil rights movement and the

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*Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1985); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985); Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow, 1987); John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996). The best local studies are John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Adam Fairclough, *Race And Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got The Light Of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Biographical studies that reflect recent historiographical developments include Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Peter J. Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: Routledge, 2002); Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow Of The Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994); Tyson, *Radio*.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, 'Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History' (PhD thesis, Howard University, 1975); Kerran L. Sanger, *When The Spirit Says Sing!: The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland, 1995); Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.), *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1990); Ward, *Just*; Smith, *Dancing*. Important works on black music include Guralnick, *Sweet*; Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970). Most treat the civil rights movement as an historical backdrop rather than incorporating it within an analytical framework, although Kofsky adopts a Marxist conceptualisation of free jazz.

Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual: From its origins to the present* (London: W. H. Allen, 1967); Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, second edition 1996); Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 2001); Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Van Deburg, *New Day*, William L. Van Deburg., *Black Camelot: African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The life of a man who changed black America* (Barrytown NY: Station Hill Press, 1991) is more of a psycho-biography. For the BPP and Us, Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (eds.), *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Pearson, *Shadow*; Scot Brown, 'The US Organization: African-American Cultural Nationalism in the Era of Black Power, 1965 to the 1970s' (PhD Thesis, Cornell University, 1999).

federal government. Furthermore, it widens our understanding of the 'moderate' movement by proving that its focus was not simply in the social, political and economic spheres. Such a study also interrupts the interpretation of the movement as a rise-and-fall phenomenon. The traditional narrative of the civil rights movement presents a gathering of pace in the 1950s, followed by the crescendos of Birmingham and Selma and a sharp decline afterwards. Present historiography has moved beyond this assessment to detect a variety of peaks and troughs within this story.<sup>14</sup> This study also does so and will devote little attention to the well-known civil rights 'events' such as Birmingham and Selma, instead focusing on the underlying developments in the movement's engagement with African American culture.

This study, therefore, engages with two central issues. Firstly, it examines how the civil rights movement engaged with and used African American culture as a political weapon. Secondly, it proposes that such a study subtly transforms one's interpretation of the movement. A focus on culture suggests that 1964 was the turning point within the movement. During this year, SNCC firmly embraced the concept of utilising culture as a weapon. The SCLC, although less convinced of the value of such work, began to shift its focus north, as did CORE, which also began to appreciate the value of SNCC's approach to organising. Led by Malcolm X, black nationalists began to assert their conception of the freedom struggle. His discovery of Africa is commonly acknowledged as the turning point in his life, but its implications for his interpretation of black culture have rarely been appreciated until now.

Edward Said notes that culture can be 'a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day.'<sup>15</sup> The present study is concerned with this definition of the use of culture but it will not propose that culture defined the civil rights movement

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<sup>14</sup> Dittmer, *Local*; Fairclough, *Race*; Payne, *I've Got*; Tyson, *Radio*; Ward (ed.), *Media are just a few works that reflect this trend*. Charles Payne, 'Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches' in Steven Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) pp. 99-136 offers a challenge to future historians to continue in this direction and resist normative interpretations of the civil rights movement.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993) p. xiv.



in its totality. Its primary concern is the relationship between the civil rights movement and African American culture, rather than with critiquing African American culture in the 1960s. Thus it is more important for this study to discuss the *impact* of Amiri Baraka's work than it is to make a critical appraisal of his literary output. As such it might be defined as a social history of culture in the civil rights movement.

## **Definition**

For Antonio Gramsci, oppositional movements can challenge the hegemonic order on many fronts, including culture. In suggesting as much, Gramsci shifts the focus of Marxist historical materialism from the base to the superstructure. His theory helps to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate groups. Gramsci suggests that, with the leadership of a class of organic intellectuals – individuals who operate as educators or leaders within the ranks of a social class, such as journalists or teachers – the working class is able to construct an independent counter-hegemonic world-view, or culture, that can become the centre of revolutionary action. This culture, according to Gramsci, is itself a material force and thus becomes a battleground in a revolutionary movement.<sup>16</sup> So, even while the African American community was being atomised and subordinated, it was able to forge a certain level of autonomy through, for example, the black church or jazz music. Cultural autonomy was one of the means through which African Americans were able to express themselves to each other and maintain their form of resistance.<sup>17</sup> Thus African Americans were able to continue a tradition of accommodation and resistance through cultural outlets in the twentieth century, and the civil rights movement exploited this tradition. Although this study does not conceive of

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<sup>16</sup> Quintin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell Smith (trans. and eds.) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971) pp. 165, 324-333.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Genovese examines this process in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture And Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) has a less rigid conceptual framework.

the movement as revolutionary, it acknowledges that culture was a battleground – both between the movement and white society, and within the movement itself. As Stuart Hall notes, Gramsci's thought indicates that the culture of a particular historical society – in this case, that of the African American population – 'constitute[s] a crucial site for the construction of a popular hegemony.'<sup>18</sup>

Such a study is in danger of becoming too broad. Culture, as Terry Eagleton accepts is one of the most complex words in the English lexicon.<sup>19</sup> It is also notoriously indefinite: it would be possible to talk of a 'civil rights culture' but extremely difficult to elaborate on exactly what this culture would contain. Eagleton suggests that culture is a phenomenon that helps interest groups differentiate themselves, although he accepts that the assertion of superiority of a particular cultural identity results in racism or, as he puts it, 'spurious attempts to rationalize' this superiority.<sup>20</sup> It has class connotations: to be cultured is commonly regarded to be refined and educated. This, however, suggests that those without refined airs and who have received a poor education – the southern black working class, for example – are not cultured. It would be foolish to suggest that such people do not have a culture. As Eagleton points out, culture could also be defined as 'whatever is superfluous to a society's material requirements.'<sup>21</sup> One might then suggest that music is culture, but others such as Guy Carawan of the Highlander Folk School would argue that music is fundamental to human existence. Although Eagleton's formulations so far are indefinite, both have one thing in common – namely that identity forms an inherent component of culture.

Elsewhere, Eagleton suggests that culture is not inherently political.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the specific historical conditions that contextualise this culture render it political. Eagleton

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity' *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (summer 1986) p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 58. Eagleton builds on the conception of subcultures in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Eagleton, *Idea* p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 61.

states that to sing a Breton love song or to stage an exhibition of African American art is not an innately political act.<sup>23</sup> However, when such acts are caught up in a wider narrative of historical change or, in a process of domination and resistance, they take on a political guise. Of course, in the context of the 1960s, many cultural acts – such as Aretha Franklin’s ‘Respect’ – became political simply because of their existence: in simple terms, some songs that were sung at movement meetings, marches and demonstrations might not have had a political message when they were written, but the context in which they were sung rendered them political. Furthermore, as the unofficial journal of the civil rights movement, *Freedomways* editorialised in 1962, ‘the number of Negroes seriously working at the task of rendering socially significant ideas in artistic cultural form are larger than at any previous period in our history... the Negro cultural worker in our own country has a great function of the utmost social significance.’<sup>24</sup> This study operates in such a context, where theatre and literature took on political meaning, sometimes unwittingly but often deliberately. It also suggests that the individual is as important to the creation of ‘culture’ as the culture industry.<sup>25</sup> Thus there is little space devoted here to the relationship between the movement and television, for example – although this is not to suggest that television was not important to the movement’s success. This study focuses on certain forms of culture as emblematic of the relationship between the movement and African American culture.<sup>26</sup> Amiri Baraka’s journalism and plays, for example, demonstrate the growth of black nationalism in the 1960s. Baraka’s example suggests that some roots of Black Power lay in the Cuban revolution and that the black nationalist critique emerged outside the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Editorial: ‘Culture in the Cause of Negro Freedom’ *Freedomways* 2,2 (spring 1962) pp. 117-118.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 29-43. See James Clifford, ‘On Collecting Art and Culture’ *ibid.* pp. 56-60 for a critique that suggests the term ‘culture industry’ is oxymoronic.

<sup>26</sup> E. H. Carr and Raymond Williams accept that selection is an inevitable, yet acceptable, aspect of the historian’s task. Postmodern historians suggest that this is one of the failures of history as a discipline. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) pp. 7-30; Raymond Williams, ‘The Analysis of Culture’ in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (London: Prentice Hall, second edition 1998) pp. 48-56; Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

nonviolent movement. However, Baraka's relationship with Robert F. Williams also suggests that there were definite links between Black Power and the southern movement.

In terms of the forms of culture to be discussed, this study will acknowledge and appreciate select elements of folk culture, popular culture and – for want of a less judgmental term – high culture. Literature and theatre are commonly defined as high culture. This study will briefly examine the use of certain African American literary texts as educational tools but will concern itself more centrally with the work of Amiri Baraka. He initially refused to engage with the movement but events in the 1960s compelled him both to update his conception of politics and to embroil himself in the struggle. He fits into the study's interest in the civil rights organisations through his association with the Black Panther Party and Maulana Ron Karenga's Us organisation that emerged in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s.

Baraka is a central link between African American 'high' and popular culture. During the 1960s his writing began to address the wider black community and descend from the ebony tower that he had constructed for himself in the 1950s. He also engaged himself earnestly in writing theatrical plays that were designed increasingly for mass (black) consumption. The development of Baraka's theatre is useful as a barometer of his interest in black nationalism and as an indicator of the growth of black nationalism itself.<sup>27</sup> In 1969, one of Baraka's black nationalist plays was performed by a New Orleans theatre group. The Free Southern Theater (FST) emerged from SNCC's ranks in 1964 before establishing itself as an independent theatre organisation. It played a central role in SNCC's 1964 Summer Project before locating itself in New Orleans and embracing black nationalism. The FST's adoption of black nationalism came about

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<sup>27</sup> To prevent this study becoming too Baraka-focused, there will be no assessment of his poetry and his fiction during this period. In fact, although both to an extent reflect Baraka's political development, they are almost self-consciously less political than his journalism and his plays. Baraka's plays are the clearest barometer of his political consciousness and his journalism concerns itself explicitly with the African American freedom struggle. Although clearly autobiographical, Baraka's fiction and poetry tend not to address themselves directly to the concerns of this study.

largely because of its experience of working in the South. Its history is another significant indicator of how the movement itself generated black nationalist sentiment. This study will also evaluate the relationship between the Black Panther Party (BPP) and African American art. It will suggest that the BPP was actually close in spirit to the cultural nationalists, such as Karenga, that it spent so much time in the late 1960s attacking. Other models of popular culture that will be included in this study include Dick Gregory's comedy, which became an important pressure valve for the black citizens of Greenwood, Mississippi, during SNCC's campaign in the town and black nationalist guru Robert F. Williams' radio broadcasts from exile in Cuba. While the relationship between sport and the movement is not a central concern of this study, it will examine the friendship between Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Their brief association illuminates Malcolm X's increasing awareness of cultural issues and the significance of sporting icons to the movement.<sup>28</sup>

Folk culture was of great importance and formed one of the most important backbones of the movement. As SNCC's John O'Neal noted, 'it was a singing movement.'<sup>29</sup> The songs of the civil rights movement emerged out of the confluence of white folk music, slave songs and the black gospel tradition. They gave spiritual uplift to participants, engendered a spirit of unity, inspired and mobilised thousands and embedded the movement in the psyche of many more. They even provided the opportunity for the civil rights organisations to generate funds through concert performances. Without song, the movement would have been an entirely different phenomenon. But the movement also engaged with folk culture in a more subtle manner. As Antonio Gramsci suggests, hegemony is able to exercise its influence

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<sup>28</sup> For in-depth studies of race and sport in the 1960s, see Amy Bass, *Not The Triumph But The Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Maureen Margaret Smith, 'Identity and Citizenship: African American Athletes, Sport, and the Freedom Struggles of the 1960s' (PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1999). Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969) is fiercely partisan account of the rise of Black Power in campus athletics during the late 1960s. Jeffrey T. Sammons "'Race" and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination' *Journal of Sport History* 21 (1994) pp. 203-278 provides a useful bibliographical survey.

<sup>29</sup> John O'Neal, interview with Tom Dent 25 September 1983. Mississippi Oral Histories, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University cassette #45.

through the educational system.<sup>30</sup> It follows that counter-hegemonic practices can be revised to include education. Through the educational programmes of the Citizenship Education Project (CEP) and SNCC's 1964 Summer Project, African American adults and children learned that the culture of the black South was something to be proud of. The educators furthermore learned that culture could be a powerful educational tool. Song was a fundamental component of these programmes: lessons always began and ended with the communal singing of a number of freedom songs.

This study therefore engages with the use of folk culture in a number of ways. It illustrates that, through the freedom songs, the movement helped to forge a cultural form of its own through engaging with a biracial tradition of song. It also argues that folk culture was an important pedagogic element for the movement. Through this folk culture, the movement was able to involve many people who might otherwise have been left to continue their lives without education and, crucially, without access to the American political system. Without the protection of literacy many southern blacks were unable even to register to vote. Prior to (and indeed, following) the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, then, the educational policy of the civil rights movement played a vital role in creating a new political culture in the South. This education policy also sheds light on the relationship between movement organisations and the local community. It establishes the difference between SNCC's honest commitment to 'local people' and CORE's more self-serving belief that local-level initiatives were useful as a promotional exercise for the organisation. The Highlander Folk School was central to this development. Its belief that the solutions to oppressive practices lay with the oppressed was hugely influential on SNCC and helped to define SNCC's conception of struggle. It also maintained that folk culture, such as song and dance, was of vital importance in solidifying bonds between people and in creating a sense of community. Without Highlander, the so-called 'culture' of the civil rights movement would have taken an entirely different form.

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<sup>30</sup> Hoare and Smith (eds.), *Selections* pp. 247, 258-259, 350.

This discussion alludes to another aspect of culture that was a prime consideration of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. One of the movement's concerns was the reclamation of black history from the white man. Most scholars of Black Power acknowledge that one of the specific goals of the radical movement was to reject the white domination of history. The response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and the furore over Black Studies lead to this inevitable conclusion.<sup>31</sup> Most also appreciate that Malcolm X made much use of history in his last year. Few, however, note that reclaiming black history for the black man was one of his most important concerns. In fact, Malcolm X insisted that the lack of knowledge about history was one of the key failings of the black community. Naturally, he stressed that to become free, African Americans simply had to be awakened to their history. Similarly, history was a prime concern of the 1964 Summer Project. This has been under-appreciated by historians who are concerned more with the effect of the Project on voter registration or on the white students who assisted in the registration campaign and taught in the freedom schools. The schools established by SNCC placed a particular emphasis on instructing their students in black history, which further illuminates how culture was utilised by the movement to stimulate political action. The culture that this study is concerned with is an amalgam of the highbrow and the lowbrow, from literature and theatre, through journalism and radio, down to comedy and song, with education and history linking all these forms.

### **A caveat: religion as culture in the SCLC**

Robin D. G. Kelley and Dwight Billings recognise that Christianity was a useful organising tool for working-class organising drives in the South during the twentieth

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<sup>31</sup> John Henrik Clarke (ed.), *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon, 1968); James Campbell, 'Profile: William Styron' *The Guardian* (London) Review Section 22 March 2003 pp. 20-23; Scot French, 'Mau-Mauing the Filmmakers: Should Black Power Take the Rap for Killing *Nat Turner*, the Movie?' in Ward (ed.), *Media* pp. 233-254. For Black Studies, Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 63-82; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 294-299.

century. Kelley observes that Communist organisers in Depression-era Alabama incorporated religion in their attempt to organise local black workers. He notes the value of religion to the development of Southern black culture and indicates that the radicals in Alabama, firstly, were grounded in the spiritual world of the black community and, secondly, rarely attempted to separate their politics (and that of their supporters) from their religion.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the use of song by the radicals was firmly grounded in black traditions, with meetings often commencing and concluding with group singing, just as sessions were at Highlander. Kelley also notes that Communists were adept at manipulating this cultural tradition, adding new lyrics referring to racial solidarity, suffrage and working class traditions to pre-existent songs, many of which were drawn from African American Christianity.<sup>33</sup> For Billings, religion played a conflicting role in two southern localities, being used by trade unions both to encourage quiescence and action. Billings also acknowledges the transformation of religious hymns into secular workers' songs and suggests that this cultural appropriation was a significant factor in the relative success of such drives.<sup>34</sup>

These works indicate that religion was a core element of protest in the black South. Given the explicitly leftist slant of the work examined by Billings and Kelley, it is unlikely that the SCLC deliberately tapped into this history. Due in part to the waning of the Old Left in the 1950s, the nascent civil rights movement was not able to draw on the experience of 1930s union organisers. The SCLC was also highly sceptical of the role of trade unionism in the South and feared being tainted by any links with Communism, so it kept its distance from the unions. However, the worth of African American Christianity to the civil rights movement and the SCLC, in particular, cannot be denied. Indeed, this relationship largely defined the SCLC's conception of culture as a whole. This is not surprising, given that the primary meeting place for the SCLC was

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<sup>32</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer And Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) pp. 107, 135.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* pp. 96-99, 107, 136, 149-150.

<sup>34</sup> Dwight B. Billings, 'Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis' *American Journal of Sociology* 96,1 (July 1990) pp. 1-31.



the church.<sup>35</sup> With such an organisational base it would be churlish to criticise the SCLC for failing to conceive of culture outside the religious sphere since, for the SCLC, the church was the quintessential African American cultural institution. The SCLC felt that its programmes could best be implemented through the church. As an internal memo asserted, ‘any successful voter registration drive, whether it be short-range and intensive or long-range and substantial, must be church-oriented. This is true of any program in the South.’<sup>36</sup> The SCLC struggled to conceive of a viable secular culture being useful within its struggle for freedom. There are definite indications that the ministers of the SCLC were not particularly convinced, or even aware, of the efficacy of an explicitly cultural approach to their work.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was convinced of the centrality of Christianity to the freedom struggle. Nonviolence might have been physically weak but it had an indestructible spiritual backbone. Christianity provided the strength of this backbone and, for the SCLC, was an efficient mobilising force.<sup>37</sup> King concluded that it was the duty of the church to push for equality, for without this zeal, the church would become ‘little more than an irrelevant social club with a thin veneer of religiosity... caus[ing] men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will.’ King felt that desegregation could only do so much to end inequality – it was down to the church to do something to ‘touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right.’<sup>38</sup> As King preached to the Montgomery Improvement Association,

this is a spiritual movement and we are depending on moral and spiritual forces. That is the only weapon we have... We want the world to know that we believe in God, and we believe that God controls the destiny of the universe, and Evil can't triumph in

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, ‘SCLC’s Creative Role in Developing Church-Oriented Voter Registration Programs’ n.d., Records of the Southern Regional Council, Library of Congress microfilm reel 173, frame 0099. Hereafter cited as SRC.

<sup>36</sup> ‘ibid. SRC reel 173, frame 0098.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, Martin Luther King Jr., ‘Nonviolence and Racial Justice,’ (1957). In James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) pp. 5-9.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., ‘A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues’ address to the National Conference on Religion and Race, Chicago 17 January 1963 pp. 3, 11. Text in Social Action Vertical File, State Historical Society of Wisconsin box 42.

this universe. This is our hope. This is the thing that keeps us going.<sup>39</sup>

The secular world simply could not provide the nourishment that the soul needed after the beatings inflicted by a violent society on the nonviolent person. And the choice for the nonviolent person was stark: accept the embrace of Christianity or find oneself unprotected from the psychic assault that inevitably stemmed from the physical.

King was not overly concerned with secular culture, obviously as a result of his faith. He saw the freedom songs as an expression of Christian faith and hope, rather than attributing much secular appeal to them. In late 1961, he remembered his curiosity at Freedom Riders singing such songs whilst they were travelling down to Mississippi 'to face hostile and jeering mobs.'<sup>40</sup> This illuminates a minor problem, since Freedom Riders were not necessarily Christian. What, then, did the songs mean for these people? For SNCC activist Mary King, the freedom songs developed as a form of folk expression and also were an integral part of the movement. In her interpretation, the freedom songs were the fuel on which the movement ran: 'the outpouring of freedom songs went to the core of the struggle and expressed, as nothing else was able, the hope, belief, desire, passion, dreams, and anguish of the conflict.'<sup>41</sup> In fact, Mary King suggests that the freedom songs were secularised by SNCC activists. Her invocation of the freedom songs illustrates that folk culture offers different meanings and metaphors to different people and that it belongs to those who use it, not just those who create it. Ultimately, this study is more concerned with the political uses of secular culture and so will spend relatively little space examining the relationship of the SCLC to culture. However, it acknowledges that the example of the SCLC's suggests that culture was not of paramount importance to the movement.

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Address to Montgomery Improvement Association, Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, 22 March 1956 in Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Peter Holloran, Dana L. H. Powell (eds.) *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume III: Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p. 200.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Love, Law and Civil Disobedience' (1961) in Washington (ed.) *Testament* p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> King, *Freedom Song* p. 92. See also the freedom songs quoted pp. 33, 93, 94, 97, 155, 167-169, 249, 301, 399, 437.

Although they illustrate the centrality of religion, Kelley's and Billings' studies also illuminate the long term relationship between southern organising and southern culture. They establish that working-class organising in the South was dependent to an extent on how the organisers related to the workers. This relationship was often mediated through the prism of culture. In Depression-era Alabama, Communist organisers created their own educational structures for the workers after noticing that their message was difficult for a generally illiterate and semi-literate membership to understand. Thus sections of Communist Party (CP) meetings were set aside for study and reading time and reading groups were established where the more literate would assist the others in getting to grips with Communist literature. Consequently, one of the attractions of the CP to Southern blacks was the promise of education – something that the state was distinctly not offering.<sup>42</sup> This method was successfully used in the Citizenship Education Program, run by Highlander and, subsequently, the SCLC. Later in the 1930s, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) too mined the black cultural heritage as an organising tool, sponsoring art exhibits, musical performances and theatrical productions to reach the widest possible number of people, whilst allowing its house publication to become 'a forum for creative expression,' for poetry-writing supporters.<sup>43</sup> Thus the left in Alabama was filtered through the cultural heritage of those that became involved. As Kelley concludes, 'black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle.'<sup>44</sup> It is this (secular) relationship that the present study wishes to illuminate.

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<sup>42</sup> Kelley, *Hammer* p. 93-95.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* pp. 207-212, quote p. 208.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p. 93

## Structure

Chapter One explores Highlander's legacy in the civil rights movement. It examines closely Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan's conception of folk culture as an organising tool and illustrates how the indigenous culture of the South was utilised in Highlander's most important gift to the movement, the Citizenship Education Project. Chapter Two investigates the use that the SCLC, CORE and SNCC made of African American culture between 1960 and 1963. It suggests that, while all three developed an interest in it and experimented with using culture in different contexts, only SNCC committed much energy to such work. Chapter Three studies three major black nationalist figures in the same period. Between 1960 and 1963, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka and Robert F. Williams articulated how African American culture could be used as a fundamental component of the freedom struggle and proposed that such culture be a useful means through which the black community could be united. For Baraka and Williams, Cuba was a central motif for the African American freedom struggle. It brought them together and, initially at least, showed them the route to liberation. Although Malcolm X was much less enamoured with the Cuban revolution, it is notable that he was the first black personality to meet Fidel Castro when the latter visited Harlem in September 1960.<sup>45</sup> Combined, their work forms much of the intellectual context within which black nationalism redefined itself in the late 1960s.

Chapters Four and Five consider the significance of the events of 1964. Chapter Four focuses on SNCC's 1964 Summer Project, placing it at the centre of the 1960s movement. The chapter suggests that, for SNCC, the Summer Project in many ways represented the crossing of the Rubicon, when the organisation lost faith in liberalism and came to appreciate the worth of black culture to the movement. The chapter highlights the freedom schools and the formation of the Free Southern Theater as two of the most important legacies of the summer. Chapter Five explores the rise of cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Van Gosse, *Where The Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (London: Verso, 1993) p. 151.

black nationalism in the same year, focusing on figures such as Malcolm X and Baraka, whilst also delineating how CORE and the SCLC began to engage with the northern ghettos. The image of Africa as a cultural entity is an issue that becomes increasingly important after 1964. It receives due attention in chapters Five and Seven. As such, 1964 is posited as the turning point of the movement, when the integrationist organisations turned their focus away from the South and when black nationalism began to be appreciated as a viable policy within the movement.

The resulting advance of Black Power is dealt with in chapters Six, Seven and Eight. Chapter Six explores how the SCLC reacted to the resurgence of black nationalism. It also details how the SCLC worked with Highlander in bringing folk culture to the Poor People's Campaign. Highlander's role in the later stages of the 1960s civil rights movement has been given short shrift by historians. Although it maintained a low-level involvement in the movement, it continued to inspire activists such as Anne Romaine of the Southern Students Organizing Committee. Romaine established her own organisation that intended to reunite the people of the South with their biracial folk traditions and receives due attention in this chapter. Chapter Six also examines Romaine's relationship with Bernice Johnson Reagon to illuminate how black nationalism worked to undermine interracial organising efforts. Chapter Seven then assesses the reactions of CORE and SNCC to the 1964 Summer Project. Rather than focusing exclusively on their interpretation of Black Power, this chapter explores their organising initiatives during this period. In doing so, it suggests that the rhetoric of the period was somewhat different from the programmatic aims. Although only a limited number of these programmes succeeded, the plans that many SNCC and CORE organisers had indicates that they were very much interested in bringing African American culture into the centre of the freedom struggle. The relationship of the civil rights organisations to the North is a theme that runs through the entire thesis. The problems of using culture as a weapon are illustrated through the difficulties that the organisations had in translating their southern experiences to the North. CORE's

relationship with the North is a particular concern, for CORE's northern chapters exerted a great deal of influence in transforming the political and cultural outlook of the organisation. Chapter Eight explores the continued rise of cultural nationalism and examines the history of the FST in the Black Power era. It also establishes how cultural nationalism informed the black nationalists of the late 1960s, examining the relationship between Amiri Baraka and Ron Karenga before appraising the relationship between the Black Panther Party and African American culture.

This study reinterprets the history of the civil rights movement through the prism of African American culture. It offers a perspective that moves away from the concerns of political history, thus extending the parameters through which historians study the movement. This perspective offers the historian the opportunity to re-examine the shift of the movement towards radicalism and the North from within the movement rather than interpreting it as a response to the (in)action of the federal government. The thesis also returns the Highlander Folk School to the centre of movement history. Much of the movement's verve derived from Highlander and many of the concerns of SNCC, in particular, can be traced back to the Appalachian school. It is an apposite place to start.

# 1.

## **Singing for Freedom: Folk Culture, the Highlander Folk School and the civil rights movement**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Highlander Folk School became the great meeting place of the civil rights movement. Many activists including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis and Septima Clark spent time discussing methods of protest with Highlander's staff and volunteers before applying these techniques elsewhere. Through its workshops, Highlander helped to create and mould a new generation of activists that spread the Highlander ethos throughout the South. Fundamental to Highlander's operation was folk song. Visitors were encouraged to join in singing, dancing and making music. These activities, Highlander reasoned, would develop community bonds and create indigenous leaders.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon notes, staff and students at Highlander would swap songs regularly. Staff would sing their new songs to subsequent workshops to see how others responded to them. If groups responded well, then they would be kept and used again.<sup>1</sup> Through this method, Highlander built up a collection of songs that visitors identified with. By the early 1960s, Highlander's repertoire had coalesced around an amalgam of African American spirituals, secular union songs from the 1940s and original compositions that were an explicit attempt to portray the message of the African American freedom movement through song. The freedom songs, as they were

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<sup>1</sup> Bernice Reagon, interview with Therese Spaude, 27 January 1982 State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW), cassette 1303A side 1.

known, remain as a powerful reminder of the 1960s movement and illustrate perfectly how the movement engaged with a tradition of cultural and political protest. To understand fully the legacy and meaning of these songs, it is necessary to examine the influence of Highlander's two music directors: Zilphia Horton and her successor, Guy Carawan. Their experiences illustrate how Highlander fused white and black American protest culture and why it was so keen to utilise folk culture in the creation of protest movements. Furthermore, Carawan's experience as a travelling singer in the early 1960s raises important issues about the black community's relationship with its culture and heritage. Whilst Carawan might have made mistakes in his assessment of this issue, his conclusions pose important questions about the role of the civil rights movement – and of white people within it.

The influence of Highlander is also effectively illustrated through a study of the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), which created a network of over 900 informal citizenship schools in many areas of the rural South and led to the registration of hundreds of thousands of African American voters. The CEP played a critical role in ensuring the ongoing success of the civil rights movement. Although the primary goal of these schools was to increase black enfranchisement, underneath this exterior was a complex programme designed to perpetuate black cultural traditions and instil a commitment to democratic protest in southern communities. Naturally, the freedom songs played a central role in the curriculum. In fact, the CEP curriculum was explicitly designed to reflect the indigenous culture of the black South. In doing so, its designers ensured that the CEP did not become an alienating experience for students and helped to preserve many important cultural traditions. By 1960, the CEP had been passed over to the direction of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Although the essence of the programme remained, the SCLC attempted to make subtle changes to its direction in order to fuse it with the SCLC's overtly Christian message. These events provide an illustration of how the SCLC engaged with black and white folk culture



while it simultaneously emphasised the middle-class and respectable aura of black protest in the early 1960s.

## **Cultural policy at Highlander**

The influence of Highlander on the civil rights movement has been so well documented that one would be ill advised to study the movement without first studying its work. Much of the existing historical attention focuses on the attendance of movement activists, such as Rosa Parks or John Lewis, at various Highlander workshops and how they imbibed the inspiring brew of integration before spreading it to the world at large. However, the cultural impulse that drove Highlander has rarely been given primary focus, with most studies defining Highlander as simply a meeting place for activists.<sup>2</sup> James Forman exhibits scepticism about the influence of Highlander, asserting that, ‘no workshop in the world could prepare anyone fully’ for the violence that SNCC workers were encountering in Mississippi during 1961 and 1962.<sup>3</sup> John Lewis comes closer to the spirit of Highlander, remembering that there was ‘an undeniable, infectious energy running through this collection of simple whitewashed buildings,’ where singing was an integral part of daily life, and that he left his first Highlander session, ‘on fire.’<sup>4</sup> Charles Payne notes that music and singing were central to the operation of the school but delves no further, choosing instead to focus on the work of Septima Clark in the citizenship schools, understandably so, given the focus of his work on the movement in Mississippi.<sup>5</sup> Carl Tjerandsen of the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, which contributed

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) pp. 163-164, 290, 486-487; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 28, 41, 50-51, 77; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) pp. 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985) p. 282.

<sup>4</sup> John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) pp. 81, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got The Light Of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) pp. 71-77.

funds to Highlander between 1953 and 1961, also notes that Highlander's remit extended far beyond simple education. He cites Myles Horton asserting that,

it was not because the... [Highlander staff] taught people to write checks or to register to vote or even to read and write. These were part of the world that *is* and they might be useful and good things. But one could learn to write for the purpose of forging a check. What was needed was the concept of what *ought to be* – human brotherhood, dignity and democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Highlander's ethos was not simply community development but, as Horton stressed, 'people development.'<sup>7</sup> It was based around the idea that the solutions to social problems would be found through the lessons of history and the pooling of individual experiences and knowledge. In addition to education, Highlander also devoted itself, in Myles Horton's words, 'to conserve and enrich the indigenous cultural values of the [Appalachian] mountains.'<sup>8</sup> Highlander's relationship with local communities and local people became a motif that characterised the work of those who trained at the school throughout the 1960s and became a crucial factor in the creation of a new political culture in the South. This influence can easily be detected in SNCC's work in Mississippi, many of whose staff attended Highlander workshops. The creation of this new political culture was based on the knowledge that most black southerners were not registered to vote and were not educated to a level at which they were aware of their potential political power. Highlander's work revealed that this situation could be altered through citizenship schools. The promise of Reconstruction could then be fulfilled and black southerners be able to participate fully in civic life. An additional effect of these schools proved to be a huge change in awareness amongst southern blacks, most notably around their own self-image. The Highlander programme emphasised to

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Tjerandsen, *Education For Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience* (Santa Cruz: Emil Schwartzhaupt Foundation, 1980) p. 142. Emphasis in original. Myles Horton called the Schwartzhaupt Foundation's initial grant to Highlander – for an undefined and unproven programme that attracted, amongst others, Septima Clark – the most important grant that the school ever received. *ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 143. Emphasis in original, which comes from a statement made by Herman Blake, recounting a meeting with Myles Horton.

<sup>8</sup> Horton quoted in John Egerton, *Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) p. 159.

citizenship school students that their heritage was valid and that their culture was viable and legitimate. Both were therefore worthy of celebration and preservation.

John Glen comes closest to acknowledging the true value that the school placed on folk culture in its work. Glen notes that Zilphia Horton integrated Highlander's cultural programme with the more formal curriculum, thus designating music and folk dancing as prototypical "edutainment." These activities instilled solidarity, cultural pride, inspiration and hope in communities and contributed to the development of leadership. The reasoning behind this was that if people could lead others in song and dance, then why not in political organising?<sup>9</sup> Although Glen notes that cultural activities were an accepted part of the curriculum before Zilphia Horton's death, he does not go far enough in exploring Highlander's policy on such work. Glen suggests that Horton's effervescence carried the work and that there was little involvement from other staff members. In doing so, Glen does not fully appreciate how important cultural activities were to Highlander. Highlander's official policy asserted that democracy meant more than simply freedom of thought and religion and equal rights to a livelihood, education and health; it also meant an equal opportunity 'to participate in the cultural life of the community.'<sup>10</sup> As the report for the 1958 workshops – after Zilphia Horton's death – on citizenship and integration related, 'the spirit of Highlander was exemplified in the evening programs... built up of informal singing around the piano or other instruments, and of creative dramatizations of the problems discussed in the workshop sessions, made up almost on the spot by the participants.'<sup>11</sup> Myles Horton firmly believed in the value of music and singing to the Highlander programme, considering it to be part of the school's original concept.<sup>12</sup> Song lyrics could inspire people to become activists, tell stories that illiterate people might not read and, importantly, involve everybody.

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<sup>9</sup> John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996) pp. 46-47

<sup>10</sup> 'Highlander Folk School Statement of Purpose, Program and Policy,' approved April 3 1950. HREC box 1 folder 2.

<sup>11</sup> '1958 Workshops in Citizenship and Integration' August 1958 p. 3. Highlander Research and Education Center records, SHSW box 1 folder 6. Hereafter cited as HREC.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Myles Horton, 'Random Notes' n.d. HREC box 13 folder 31.

The democratic practice of communal singing was more than simply a means to create bonds of friendship. It was also a device for transmitting ideological and pedagogical messages. By the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Highlander had expanded and deepened its interpretation of democracy to include all peoples and all aspects of everyday life. ‘Democracy must be kept fresh and growing,’ the 1955 Annual Report asserted,

by recreating it anew as life is lived, the only way it can be lived, from day to day. Democracy can only be nurtured by the people themselves in their own communities. We believe that one way we have of working toward this objective is to help spread democratic leadership.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the solution to the tensions and conflict that existed in Southern society could be eased through a multiracial commitment to improving not just schools and churches, but also cultural opportunities.<sup>14</sup> For the staff at Highlander, the singing and dramatic programmes were an integral part of the curriculum. Groups bonded with each other over their shared heritage during these sessions. Highlander staff felt that, without the cultural activities, students would not respond so well to the rest of the work that was being conducted during the day.

Nevertheless, Glen is correct to highlight the integral role that Zilphia Horton played in leading the cultural activities at Highlander. Much of their verve and potency derived from her. She is often referred to as the spirit of the school and, without her, it is possible that the school would have taken an entirely different direction. She brought song to the centre of Highlander’s ethos, believing that music should be at the heart of all things: ‘of situations, beliefs, of struggle, of ideas, of life itself.’<sup>15</sup> A native of Arkansas, Horton was of Spanish/Indian descent and, in her youth, became a follower of radical Presbyterian minister Claude Williams. This association led to her becoming estranged from her parents and introduced her to leftist politics. She first attended

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<sup>13</sup> Highlander Folk School 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report, 1955 HREC box 1 folder 6 pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> ‘This We Believe – at Highlander,’ 1955. HREC box 1 folder 2.

<sup>15</sup> Zilphia Horton, ‘Music isn’t trimming’ n.d. HREC box 65 folder 6.

Highlander (on Williams' suggestion) in January 1935, married Myles Horton less than three months later and, soon after, became Highlander's music director.<sup>16</sup> In this role, she collected well over 1,000 songs from the unions, other leftist groups and from black and white folk traditions. As she wrote in 1948, 'people can be made aware that many of the songs about their every day lives – songs about their work, hopes, their joys and sorrows – are songs of merit. This gives them a new sense of dignity and pride in their own cultural heritage.'<sup>17</sup> This concept of cultural exchange later became an important element in Highlander's inter-cultural projects under Guy Carawan's tutelage. Horton also argued that people's lives could be enriched through song, especially through songs of other cultures. Within two years of her arrival, music had become a vital component in the school's programme and Horton was soon making new adaptations of traditional songs for presentation by the centre's residents. She overhauled 'Old MacDonald's Farm' into a song celebrating the CIO leader: 'John L. Lewis Had A Plan' (CI - CIO). The stoical Pentecostal hymn 'I Shall Not Be Moved' was more subtly developed into the more inclusive 'We Shall Not Be Moved,' which emphasises the fellowship of the Christian faith and transforms the song from an expression of the individual's relationship with God to the feeling that being part of a group is the key to happiness.<sup>18</sup> The parallels with the union ethos are quite simple, as is the resonance that the latter

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<sup>16</sup> Glen, *Highlander* pp. 42-43; Frank Adams with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1975) p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Zilphia Horton, 'People Like To Sing' *Food For Thought* March 1948 p. 17. Copy in HREC box 64 folder 14.

<sup>18</sup> 'I Shall Not Be Moved' features the couplets:

'Glory, Hallelujah! I shall not be moved!/ Anchored in Jehovah, I shall not be moved!'

'Tho' all hell assail me, I shall not be moved/ On the Rock of Ages, I shall not be moved'

'Tho' the tempest rages, I shall not be moved/ On the Rock of Ages, I shall not be moved.'

The version used in the civil rights movement substitutes them for the following:

'We are fighting for our freedom, we shall not be moved, [repeat]'

'We are black and white together, we shall not be moved, [repeat]'

'Our parks are integrating, we shall not be moved, [repeat]'

The chorus substitutes 'we' for 'I.'

'I Shall Not Be Moved' at [www.simusic.com/worship/ishallno.htm](http://www.simusic.com/worship/ishallno.htm) accessed on 6/6/00; movement version in Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.), *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1990) p. 25.

version had within the mainstream civil rights movement. Horton's version also emphasises a somewhat ironic feeling of motion. The original presents the individual being assailed by the tempest and by hell itself. Faith renders the individual as firmly rooted as a tree. The second version however, transforms this solidity into the conviction that the group has a goal and will not be swayed from the move to such a conclusion. Instead of the world moving around them, the singers are asserting that they are changing a static society and will not be moved from such work. Group singing, for Horton, was important in the development of group solidarity and in ensuring that leaders did not become alienated from their group. Horton felt that leadership had to emerge from the people and needed to retain a close bond with those that it was leading. For her, song could play a central role in preserving this organic relationship. This interpretation of the role and duties of leadership was central to the Highlander ethos. Zilphia Horton interpreted folk song as an international language of brotherhood, one that grew out of the soil of reality to bloom in peoples' lives.<sup>19</sup> Well aware of the slave and sharecropper tradition of singing while working, Horton detected similarities with the union movement which also had a long tradition of song. For her, these twin traditions of song cut across racial lines.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, unionism had a strong identification with protest song. For the unions, song was an accessible and effective means of transmitting ideology. The Socialist Party of America adapted European and Populist songs and wrote its own songs. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) even produced its own *Little Red Songbook*, which contained works by folk poets who wrote songs specifically for use in the union movement such as Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin, alongside the IWW manifesto.<sup>20</sup> For Hill, songs were much more resonant than pamphlets, for they were learned by heart and repeated time and time again.

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<sup>19</sup> Zilphia Horton cited in Highlander Folk School Review (1938) in Myles Horton, 'Random Notes' undated fragment HREC box 13 folder 31

<sup>20</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) pp. 9-10; Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1967) pp. 106-107, 139. Renshaw considers the songs so important that they head most of the chapters of the book. *ibid.* pp. 7, 21, 43, 75, 97, 119.

Furthermore, they would reach those who were not inclined to read pamphlets or editorials.<sup>21</sup> Even Communists noted that the IWW's songs were a 'force which helped the... [IWW] fight and grow,' characteristics that were not evident in many more ideologically charged Communist songs.<sup>22</sup> The CIO agreed. John L. Lewis wrote a foreword to a collection of labour songs that Zilphia Horton gathered, in which he stated, 'with the hundreds of men and women in labor unions singing together, their individual longing for dignity and freedom are bound into an irrepressible force.'<sup>23</sup>

Horton's 1948 article for a Canadian adult education journal could be interpreted as a blueprint for Highlander's cultural programme, such is the similarity between the themes raised in the article and what was practised at Highlander. Horton elaborated on the issue of relevance (a theme of union songs), which was something that she felt many song leaders failed to grasp:

the opportunity which leaders ignore most frequently is to include songs with word content related to the goal of the group. From this a group gets not only information but great inspiration. Informal singing is at its best when done by a group united for a common good or goal.<sup>24</sup>

To illustrate her belief, Horton related an experience when she and Myles Horton conducted an educational meeting for rural blacks in western Tennessee. They began by singing songs with a small group of interested people, which soon grew into large meeting as other folk heard the music and became inextricably drawn to this seemingly impromptu revival meeting. This developed into further performances when two locals brought their fiddle and banjo to accompany Zilphia Horton on piano, with the hootenanny eventually exhausting itself late in the night. For Horton, music had provided a means to bring the community together. It was now the job of the leader to direct the community in a creative direction: 'at this point, the direction depends on

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Hill, letter to the editor of *Solidarity*, 29 November 1914. Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Letters of Joe Hill* (New York: Oak, 1965) p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Gold, 'Change The World' *Daily Worker* 25 October 1933 quoted in Denisoff, *Great* p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> John L. Lewis cited in Horton, 'Random' p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Zilphia Horton, 'People Like To Sing' p. 17.

whether the leader has a belief that music is not separate from living – that it can help develop a philosophy which will lead to a better way of life – to real freedom and happiness for all peoples.’<sup>25</sup> Not only could song bring people together, it could provoke thought and even transmit ideology. For the Hortons and Highlander, it was an invaluable tool.

A close reading of the article reveals Horton’s frustration at the pace of change regarding race relations within the union movement. It is notable that she chose a meeting of African Americans to illustrate her argument about the transformative capacities of music. By 1948, Highlander had become critical of the CIO’s attitude to race, and was concerned about the lack of progress being made in educating workers about the value of a biracial approach to organising. During the early 1940s, Highlander, according to John Glen, ‘depended to a large extent on the willingness of southern CIO unions to use the school’s services,’ and had been instrumental in devising the curriculum for the CIO’s worker education programmes.<sup>26</sup> By 1948, however, the school was aware that a number of CIO unions were establishing their own education programmes, and so decided to broaden its programme outside the CIO, with the obvious benefit that Highlander no longer had to squabble with the less progressive unions over the race issue. Moreover, Horton must have been influenced by the failure of the CIO’s southern organising drive, titled “Operation Dixie,” to transcend racial antagonism in the South between 1946 and 1948. In an atmosphere that was increasingly tainted with anti-Communism, the CIO abandoned its commitment to racial solidarity and grew ever more wary of offending the sensibilities of white workers. By 1947 its new direction included withdrawing its funding for Highlander, which was especially galling for the Highlander staff, given that the school had previously done much to change CIO workers’ attitudes to race and segregation.<sup>27</sup> It is also significant

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* pp. 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Glen, *Highlander* pp. 125, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor And Black Civil Rights: Organising Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) pp. 183-184, 210, 218, 229-230, 236; Patricia Sullivan, *Days Of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) p.



that People's Songs, the folk music organisation founded by the Almanac Singers (a union-supporting group that included Highlander friend Pete Seeger and, periodically, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and Tom Glazer), were then considering to help Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign through a simultaneous singing campaign.<sup>28</sup> The union of populist politics and folk song must have been a signal of hope for left-leaning singers such as Horton.

Not once in the article does Horton mention her work with the union movement, and her assertion that informal singing works best when all members of the group are striving for a common goal includes an implicit critique of the unions who were not practising as much brotherhood with black people as they were with the white working class. Horton viewed song as a multiracial working-class organising tool. To suggest that the best example of her principles being put into action was not with those that she was most frequently working with indicates a certain frustration with such work. There is also Horton's reference to the freedom of *all* peoples, indicating her developing commitment to racial, as well as class, brotherhood. Although Horton did not explicitly mention this abandonment of Highlander in her critique, there is little doubt that her frustration emerged from Highlander's increasingly strained relationship with the CIO and the southern labour movement in general.

By the mid-1950s, Horton's frustration had boiled over into her work. It is likely that she was the first Highlander staff member to articulate frustration at the school's lack of success in challenging racism within the union movement and one can be certain that she exerted a huge influence over the staff at Highlander. It is without doubt that Highlander began to address racial issues soon before the *Brown v. Board of Education* suit reached the Supreme Court, which is after Horton noted the vibrancy of African

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235. Glen, *Highlander* pp. 116-127, 141-146 for the relationship between the CIO and Highlander; Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988) for a sympathetic account of Operation Dixie's failure that emphasises the role of individual organisers and posits that the CIO simply could not contend with the monolithic nature of southern culture during the immediate post-war period.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing The Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) pp. 161-163; Denisoff, *Great* pp. 115-118.

American revival meetings. While speaking at a Montana Farmers' Union School in 1956, she articulated her feeling that certain unions had become 'so reactionary and... so complacent they have lost their ideals.' 'I don't care anything about singing for people like that,' she concluded.<sup>29</sup> In this speech she repeated her insistence that a group have a common goal and uniting bond before a worthwhile culture could develop. Her analogy was a water lily: although the world only sees the bloom of the flower, its roots actually grow from the very bottom of the lake. It is the richness of the mud at the bottom of the pond that determines the strength of the root, which in turn affects the beauty of the flower. For Horton, a common morality was the mud that ultimately influences the beauty of the flower. In her words,

the water lily on top, which may not seem connected at all to a lot of people is really dependent on what goes on underneath. And that's the way I think about songs that we sing. If we sing with a group of people and they lose their purpose and they lose their belief and ideals, then the water lily is cut loose and floats – and it soon withers away.<sup>30</sup>

Following Zilphia Horton's tragic death in 1956, the Highlander music programme withered. It is doubtful however, that this was due to a loss of belief among the staff. Myles Horton, in particular, was so traumatised at losing his wife that some believe he was never the same again.<sup>31</sup> Much Highlander literature refers to Zilphia Horton as the spirit of the school and all who met her testify to her infectious zest. It is highly likely that the music programme entered its fallow period simply because the staff could not come to terms with Horton's death and could not bring themselves to search for somebody who would inevitably not mean as much to them as she had. Furthermore, Highlander was never awash with money and Zilphia Horton's replacement would most likely have to volunteer their services, contributing to the inertia in replacing her.

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<sup>29</sup> Zilphia Horton, speech at Montana Farmers' Union School, Denver [*sic*], 16 February 1956. Highlander Research and Education Center Papers Audio Collection, SHSW, cassette 60. Transcript in HREC box 110 folder 7.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Glen, *Highlander* pp. 43, 164-165 for Zilphia's death and Myles' devotion to her.

The period of mourning and searching for a replacement lasted until the appointment of Guy Carawan in 1959. Carawan arrived at Highlander on the recommendation of folk singer Pete Seeger and soon revived the music tradition of the school, contributing a fundamental component of the growing freedom movement amongst African American students in the South. That he was able to do so in such a short space of time gives credence to the assertion that the cultural programme was important to Highlander. As the 1959 Highlander Annual Report announced, Carawan's 'leadership [of the music] gave the summer workshops a quality and spirit they have missed in recent years, which was so much a part of the school when Zilphia Horton led the singing.'<sup>32</sup> This statement suggests that the cultural activities continued at Highlander between 1956 and 1959, but that they lacked the leadership that Horton, and later, Carawan brought.

### **Guy Carawan and the Freedom Songs**

If it is appropriate to nominate a Johnny Appleseed of the civil rights movement, then all the evidence points towards Guy Carawan. Born in Los Angeles to southern parents, Carawan learned guitar whilst at college from records and visits by itinerant folksingers such as Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly and Pete Seeger. Carawan first visited the South in 1953 after earning an MA in sociology and, whilst there, visited Highlander. He was inspired by Zilphia Horton's use of music and song 'in a way that was inspirational and pertinent to the struggles of the people Highlander worked with,' and returned to the folk school in 1959 to become its music director.<sup>33</sup> From the very beginning of his work at Highlander, Carawan emphasised the role of folk culture in the burgeoning African American freedom movement. As he explained to Myles Horton,

I could see the potential for a great singing movement as part of the freedom struggle – one which could far surpass the singing in the labor movement. But the concept of creating a whole

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<sup>32</sup> Highlander 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, September 1959 p. 2 HREC box 1 folder 6.

<sup>33</sup> Guy Carawan, form letter to 'friends of Highlander' c.1959 p. 1. HREC box 37 folder 11.

body of freedom songs by putting together the best songs out of the Negro past that spoke of freedom along with new adaptations of old spirituals and more modern gospel songs was new in this setting. I began to see that there was something that I could do.<sup>34</sup>

In April 1960, Highlander presented its annual college workshop. Entitled 'The New Generation Fights For Equality,' the workshop attracted 82 inductees, including John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, and James Bevel. It covered such ground as the role of whites and adults in the civil rights movement and debated the merits of litigation versus action. John Glen notes that, 'the students left Highlander not only with a set of guidelines for future protests but also with a collection of adapted spirituals and modern melodies that would become known as "freedom songs."' <sup>35</sup> In August 1960, Carawan directed a 'Sing For Freedom' workshop and festival, in which 75 singers, song leaders and choir directors, mostly from the South, spent one week sharing and learning songs that expressed the integration movement and discussing how best to lead singing at mass meetings and demonstrations. The workshop had a threefold purpose: to learn old songs, to develop song leadership skills, and to create new songs that would 'express the spirit and events of the New South.'<sup>36</sup> Carawan documented the collection of songs now known as the freedom songs at this workshop, some of which were actually composed during the week.<sup>37</sup> However, the seeds of the singing movement had already been sown in the hearts of the students who had attended the April conference. Carawan presented a number of songs to them including 'We Shall Not Be Moved,' 'This Little Light Of Mine' and 'We Shall Overcome,' which they took back to their friends and colleagues in the movement. Carawan also attended the founding conference of SNCC

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<sup>34</sup> Guy Carawan, letter to Myles and Connie [Conrad Browne of Highlander], 1965 p. 3. HREC box 37 folder 11.

<sup>35</sup> Glen, *Highlander* p. 176.

<sup>36</sup> 'Sing For Freedom – In The Community and on the Campus' workshop program, HREC box 64 folder 16.

<sup>37</sup> It is unclear which songs were composed during the later meeting. Highlander 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 1960 pp. 2-3. HREC box 1 folder 6. Carawan and Carawan (eds.), *Sing* p. 15; Cynthia Stokes Brown (ed.), *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990) pp. 55-59. Also Carawan to Myles and Connie p. 4.

and introduced the students to 'We Shall Overcome,' which was adopted as their unofficial theme tune.

Surprisingly, Carawan was frustrated at the inertia of many African Americans when it came to using song in their movement. He felt that the myth of the spontaneity of the songs needed to be dispelled, arguing that there was 'a definite amount of cultural resistance' to using freedom songs in the movement.<sup>38</sup> This he put down to two reasons. Carawan felt that college-educated African Americans had become disassociated from their folk culture. He also noted the resistance amongst educated blacks to the revivalist tone of the new freedom songs with their improvisational, communal aura. Again, this was a part of the African American heritage that Carawan felt had been lost due to white acculturation and the onrush of modernisation. It is now commonly appreciated that there were severe psychological and cultural impediments for African Americans being taught in white schools.<sup>39</sup> That Carawan was already aware of this cultural displacement is testament to his sensitivity to racism. However, he fails to come to terms with his position as a white man utilising black culture and implies that white cultural influence was more powerful than black cultural traditions. It might have been the case that the black students were initially uncomfortable in the Highlander setting and unused to learning through song. Some might not have felt comfortable in exercising their vocal chords. Furthermore, Carawan fails to come to terms with the fact that he was a white man *performing* black culture, especially given that many students had attended black churches where preachers and song leaders were black. This might have sent a message that only white people could transmit and preserve black culture and does not appreciate that white people might have altered this black culture.

A useful example of this is within 'We Shall Overcome.' Zilphia Horton first heard the song sung as 'We Will Overcome' by black Food and Tobacco workers in the

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<sup>38</sup> Carawan to Myles and Connie, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Leon H. Litwack, *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) pp. 69-73, 88-94, 107-109. Gunnar Myrdal highlighted this process in 1944. Gunnar Myrdal with Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944) pp. 645, 879-903, 904-907.

1940s as an adaptation of the church song, 'I'll Overcome Someday'. She passed it on to Pete Seeger who, unsure of the grammar and the alliteration, substituted the verb 'shall' and added a number of new verses.<sup>40</sup> Seeger later recalled that, 'the meaning of the word ["overcome"] is broadened still further... by never once explicitly stating who or what will be overcome. Thus it is left up to the singer or the listener to let their minds speculate. This means that the song is ever living and ever growing.'<sup>41</sup> Seeger's statement neatly encapsulates the Highlander approach to folk culture, namely that it is in a constant state of flux, always adapting itself – or being adapted – to suit which particular context in which it is presented. By 1960, Seeger's version was being spread by Guy Carawan to the new generation of activists. Carawan learned it in California from Frank Hamilton in a version that derived from Seeger's re-write. On 31 July 1959, Highlander was raided by the police as part of the state's attempt to discredit and close down the school. While the police were searching the premises to find illegal alcohol, the students and volunteers, led by Mary Ethel Dozier, a black high school student, began to sing 'We Shall Overcome.' Dozier added a new verse, 'we are not afraid' which was instantly adopted by the other singers.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile the song in its original form continued to feature as a religious hymn in the black church. During the SCLC Albany Campaign in December 1961, singers led by Bernice Johnson Reagon pushed the song through another transformation. Highlander's version had been sung firmly in the white folk and southern ballad traditions with all singers following the same melody. At Albany, students who had attended Highlander helped to spread Carawan's interpretation of the song. The protesters moved the song up to a different key and fused it with black choral traditions, bringing in elements of call-and-response. As Reagon

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<sup>40</sup> Guy Carawan, notes for 'We Shall Overcome' in Carawan and Carawan (eds.), *Sing* p. 15; Filene, *Romancing* p. 198. Bernice Johnson Reagon, 'Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History' (PhD thesis, Howard University, 1975) pp. 64-80 provides a history of the song from its nineteenth century roots.

<sup>41</sup> Pete Seeger letter to Al Brackman 10 June 1967. Highlander Research and Education Center records, University of Nottingham microfilm reel 35, frame 883. Hereafter cited as HREC-UN. See also Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.), *Ain't You Got A Right to the Tree of Life?: The people of Johns Island, South Carolina – their faces, their words and their songs* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, revised and expanded edition 1989) pp. 208-209 for the history of the song in relation to Highlander.

<sup>42</sup> Reagon, 'Songs' p. 82; Brown (ed.), *Ready* p. 57.

recounts, the song 'became impregnated with additional slurs and improvised musical punctuations. "My Lords," "I know that" and intricate "ohs" appeared at the beginning of lines and at musical hesitations.'<sup>43</sup> The 'new' version provided further depth to the song through harmonics and syncopated rhythms, suggesting a feeling of motion within the melodies. Adding a further level to the competing influences over the song, in 1960 Carawan, Seeger and Horton copyrighted it in order to prevent less scrupulous individuals profiting from its popularity. The funds were to be collected in a central account in the names of Zilphia Horton's executors, Carawan, Seeger and Frank Hamilton. All had to agree for any money to be withdrawn from the growing fund.<sup>44</sup> In 1965, the Fund was signed over to the administration of Highlander. In 1966, the We Shall Overcome Fund board agreed that only proposals relating to African American folk culture with the emphasis on music would be granted fund. This latter point allowed individuals such as Bernice Johnson Reagon to benefit. The We Shall Overcome Fund provided monies to help Reagon organise a cultural festival in Atlanta.<sup>45</sup> Slightly ironically, Reagon was critical of the decision to copyright the song and, in particular, of the failure to acknowledge its African American roots.<sup>46</sup>

Initially an African American song, 'We Shall Overcome' was interpreted and changed by white singers who passed it on to a younger generation of predominantly black activists who, in a sense, reclaimed it as an African American song. White institutionalisation of the song was then used to benefit black culture. While there is no suggestion that whites such as Zilphia Horton were deliberately trying to denude black culture of its distinctiveness, the example of 'We Shall Overcome' illustrates how black and white culture interacted in the twentieth century. That the song was transmitted in

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<sup>43</sup> Reagon, interview with Spaude, side 1; Reagon, 'Songs' p. 85. Examples of this version are best heard on the Various Artists CD, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Contract for 'We Shall Overcome' July 1960. HREC-UN reel 35, frame 866.

<sup>45</sup> We Shall Overcome royalty memo, 14 June 1965; 'We Shall Overcome' memo c.1966. HREC-UN reel 35 frames 873, 881. For Reagon's request for support, Bernice Reagon, letter to Myles Horton, 21 February 1966. HREC box 65 folder 3.

<sup>46</sup> Reagon, 'Songs' pp. 86-88.

white circles as a folk song while the same song was simultaneously being preserved in a black cultural tradition through the church serves as an example of how white culture accommodated and, to a certain extent, subverted a black culture that perpetuated itself almost in isolation. Carawan's statement of frustration at the African American relationship to black culture therefore reveals only half of the story. His audiences might only have been responding to a white man interpreting their culture, feeling that this was another example of the accommodation and dilution of their heritage, rather than responding to their culture in its pure form. Carawan's opinion further suggests that there was little room for resistance to white cultural influence. The other side of this historical debate maintains that the churches and the schools were arenas where blacks and whites competed for and negotiated cultural space. While whites attempted to spread their own culture, blacks tried to perpetuate theirs.<sup>47</sup> White preachers, for example, had consistently encouraged black congregations to abandon the African-derived portions of their religion. White teachers, in the few schools that were open to blacks, taught black students that white values were the only values of worth. The overwhelming message of white society was that black was 'the other' and should be shunned, which helps to explain Carawan's reasoning and frustration. Whilst Carawan is not wholly correct to assert that African Americans had become alienated from their own culture, his viewpoint does highlight the importance of biracial cultural engagement and dialogue.

It is also noteworthy that segregation paradoxically had a positive effect on black culture. As Lawrence Levine suggests, the reaction to slavery and freedom defined the contours of black culture and consciousness throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> This is not to argue that segregation was beneficial, but merely states that,

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<sup>47</sup> For example, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990) pp. 2-7, 168-185, 346-381, *passim*; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) pp. 33, 35, 54, 90, 93, 132-134.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture And Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); also James C. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) pp. 92-124.



without segregation, it might be argued that the culture that Carawan was so desperate to preserve might not have become so defined, nor so unique and noteworthy. In fact, Carawan is somewhat short-sighted in his pessimism. Although elements of the black community had become alienated from its heritage, more isolated elements had been able to insulate many aspects of black culture from white influence and preserve their own folk heritage. Naturally, the fact that this isolation formed a barrier against modernisation and its attendant rejection of the past as an anachronism also ensured that this heritage was perpetuated.

In December 1959 and again during the following winter, Carawan returned to the Sea Islands of South Carolina to augment the local citizenship schools, feeling that the classes would benefit from his presence and that he could train new song leaders. Most of the people at the classes were content to sing along, but very few were able (or willing) to grasp the baton that Carawan was passing to them. It seems, however, that this period confirmed Carawan's fears. He reported to Highlander that he had failed to train new leaders and that such work should be conducted by somebody with better educational skills.<sup>49</sup> Given the physical and cultural isolation of the Sea Islands, an African American person would have been more appropriate. All this led Carawan to conclude that his role should be that of a teachers' teacher: he would tutor song leaders, existing and potential, in the new songs and in improvisational techniques before encouraging them to spread the word to their communities. Thus he attempted to act as a counterbalance to the effects of less understanding white cultural leaders.<sup>50</sup>

Carawan's experience in the Sea Islands citizenship schools ultimately convinced him that he needed to alter the nature of his work and suggests that there was a fine line between pedagogy and patriarchy. By the end of 1961, when he left the Sea Islands after loaning one of the citizenship school students \$100 for a new set of teeth,

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<sup>49</sup> Guy Carawan, 'Report of work with adult school program in the South Carolina Sea Islands 1960-1961' p. 2. HREC box 8 folder 9.

<sup>50</sup> Carawan to Myles and Connie p. 2.

he was coming to the conclusion that his instrumental work might actually have been hindering the effectiveness of the songs. As he later confessed to Myles Horton,

my guitar and banjo were even getting in the way sometimes of the unaccompanied group singing style – with its free-swinging body movement, hand-clapping and foot-tapping – that is part of the Negro church background. I decided [then] to spend my time and energy trying to document the freedom struggle through books and records and to confine my own song leading to areas where they didn't know the songs.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout 1960 and 1961, Carawan appeared at mass meetings, conferences, freedom rides, singing, playing guitar and handing out mimeographed sheets of songs, helping to spread the gospel of the freedom song. Between 1962 and 1964, Carawan worked extensively with SNCC, documenting the movement in Greenwood, Mississippi, putting together song festivals in areas such as the Sea Islands, Atlanta and Clarksdale, Mississippi, compiling books and records and appearing at the Newport Folk Festival, whilst also taking part in activities at Highlander.<sup>52</sup> His contributions to the movement continued through the 1964 Freedom Summer and into the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign in 1967 and 1968. It is significant that Carawan began to abandon black cultural norms (namely the oral transmission of culture) for white cultural traditions (documentation and written transmission) at this point. Perhaps he belatedly came to appreciate his limitations as a white 'possessor' of black culture. Although not as active on the front line of the civil rights movement, Carawan continued to influence many of the visitors to Highlander and many in his audiences. Indeed, as a 1964 Highlander report noted, thanks to Carawan, 'music continues as [a] vital part of Highlander's program.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Some of the material that Carawan collected during SNCC's Greenwood campaign is held in the Guy Carawan collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Carawan also featured on the bill of the notorious 1965 Newport Folk Festival when Bob Dylan, wearing a gaudy shirt, horrified the audience by playing four songs with his electric guitar plugged in and a full electric band backing him. Carawan's response to this central moment in 1960s cultural history is not recorded.

<sup>53</sup> Highlander Three-Year Report, 1961-1964 p. 6. HREC box 1 folder 7.

## **Citizenship Education**

It would be simplistic, though, to restrict Highlander's influence on the culture of the civil rights movement to the spreading of the freedom songs. Its legacy ran far deeper, and was rooted in the school's pedagogic techniques and its attitude towards local community. Highlander was committed to democracy and aimed to create new leaders amongst the working class. As the school's statement of purpose proposed, 'by broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone, and deepening the concept to include every relationship, the army of democracy would be so vast and so determined that nothing undemocratic could stand in its path.'<sup>54</sup> Highlander retained total faith in the ability of the individual to identify his or herself with the common weal.

Myles Horton led an abortive attempt at community development in parts of rural Tennessee during the 1950s. For him, the failure of this programme was not due to the lack of commitment on the part of the Highlander staff, nor was it due to programmatic inadequacies. Rather, Horton felt, the crucial factor was simply that the communities had not requested Highlander to come to help them. The experience convinced him that the key to the long-term success and stability of such programmes was that the initial impetus came from the local people. This then led to a trust in the needs and desires of the students that attended the school – and was the root of Highlander's policy of allowing the specific education programme of any workshop to be determined by the needs of the students.<sup>55</sup> Through this attitude and the use of folk singing and dancing, Highlander was able to tap into, reinforce, and benefit from the culture of the South. It took the advent of Black Power to break this line of succession.

Highlander's lack of didacticism profoundly influenced Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins, both of whom first visited Highlander in 1954. Within a year, citizenship classes run by the two had been instituted on Johns Island, South Carolina, under the cover of a greengrocer's shop and Clark had been invited to join the staff of Highlander.

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<sup>54</sup> 'Highlander Folk School Statement of Purpose, Program and Policy.' In the Cold War era, Myles Horton relied on this statement to refute the accusations of communism that flew his way.

<sup>55</sup> Tjerandsen, *Education* p. 149.

The freewheeling Highlander style had taken over their classes, as Myles Horton enthused in 1955: ‘everything is discussed, although the focal point is citizenship and registration: farm problems, school problems, health and world affairs... It had been almost three weeks since the last meeting and people were still discussing things that had been talked about at the last meeting.’<sup>56</sup> Clark concurred with this interpretation of the process, arguing at a Highlander meeting that citizenship requirements should be discussed first in citizenship schools, which would naturally lead into discussions of the wider ramifications of citizenship.<sup>57</sup> The Sea Islands project became the prototype for the citizenship schools that proliferated in the South under the administration of the SCLC. By 1960, citizenship schools emerged in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and at Highlander. Between September and December 1960 alone, some 9,000 African Americans were registered to vote in Savannah, Georgia, through the citizenship schools.<sup>58</sup> Between July 1962 and early 1964, 80 citizenship schools operated in South Carolina. During this period, black voters in the state increased from 57,000 to 150,000.<sup>59</sup> It is not an exaggeration to assert that the citizenship schools were the most important single programme ever developed at Highlander.

Septima Clark’s role in the civil rights movement has been well documented, but little attention has been paid to her teaching style and her entrenchment in the culture of the South.<sup>60</sup> Clark defined the style of the citizenship schools and did much to spread them throughout the South during the early 1960s. Although the primary aims of the citizenship school were to increase the number of black voters in the area and develop people’s ability to use their voting power effectively, there was a corollary – but no less

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<sup>56</sup> Myles Horton, report on trip to Johns Island, Oct 17-20 1955. Quoted *ibid.* p. 153. For the establishment of Jenkins’ citizenship classes, see Carawans (eds.), *Ain’t* pp. 140-169.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, contributions to experimental workshop on adult education, 21 January 1961 HREC Audio Collection, cassette 206, side 2.

<sup>58</sup> Tjerandsen, *Education* pp. 174, 179.

<sup>59</sup> Septima P. Clark, ‘Literacy and Liberation’ *Freedomways* 4,1 (first quarter 1964) p. 120.

<sup>60</sup> Useful sources on her work include Brown (ed.) *Ready*; Payne, *I’ve Got The Light* pp. 70-77; Simon Cuthbert-Kerr, ‘“You Don’t Have To Make The X For Me, Because I Can Write My Own Name”’: Septima Clark, Citizenship Education, and Voter Registration in the South Carolina Sea Islands, 1954-1963’ *The Avery Review* (spring 2000) pp. 56-80.

important – aim of community development. Clark’s cousin, Bernice Robinson led the classes and asked the crucial question of her students that is the key to the success of the whole program: “what do you want to learn?”<sup>61</sup> Sensing that material from elementary schools would not be appropriate, Robinson set about creating a new curriculum. She copied a money order form in enough numbers so that the students could each practice on one. Election laws and copies of the Constitution were used in reading and spelling exercises. The students would discuss their everyday lives and use each other’s tales as the basis for writing exercises. Reading books would include sections on health services available in the locality, directions on how to address public officials in writing, money order blanks, a résumé of the area’s political parties, and so on. The cornerstone of this Highlander-influenced syllabus was relevance to Johns Island culture. It would have been simple to create a curriculum that was appropriate to all adults, but Robinson ensured that it related *specifically* to life on Johns Island.

Highlander staff noted the change in attitude towards learning that their new approach engendered. The appropriate materials notwithstanding, the citizenship schools demonstrated that education had a purpose. They offered the ability to become a voting citizen as the proverbial carrot, with no threat of the stick. No whites would be staring over students’ shoulders, taking notes on who was there – not even in a teaching position. Plus the teachers could be trusted, as they were members of the same community. It is no surprise that Highlander reported that through this new approach, adult education was ‘greatly accelerated,’ and that ‘previously unqualified men and women were prepared to... cope more effectively with community problems in a matter of three months... at the cost of \$8 per person.’<sup>62</sup> As Highlander emphasised to its students, ‘learning and purpose for learning go hand in hand.’<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Clark in Brown (ed.), *Ready* p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> ‘The Citizenship School Program: A Proposal for South-wide Voter Education’ August 1961 p. 1. HREC box 38 folder 2.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Training Leaders for Citizenship Schools’ n.d. timetable for citizenship school students p. 1. HREC box 38 folder 2.

Guy Carawan also visited the school, bringing his repertoire of freedom songs to teach the students, and to learn indigenous songs from the Sea Islands. He was taught a local version of 'Keep Your Hand on the Plow' on Johns Island in 1959, a song that he had learned during the 1950s. Alice Wine, a student at the citizenship school, sang a different version: 'Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,' which Carawan took back with him and introduced to the students who attended Highlander the following year.<sup>64</sup> It is likely that witnessing the vibrancy of black culture on the Sea Islands emphasised to Carawan his whiteness, spurring him to withdraw into a role as primarily a folklorist, as opposed to exemplar, of black culture. As the citizenship schools spread, so did the singing. The 1960 report of the Edisto citizenship school reported that the music 'helped in many ways,' adding 'spirit and interest to the work... [and helping] people to take their minds off themselves and center them more on one another and the goal toward which we are working.'<sup>65</sup> Over the next four years, Carawan repeatedly revisited Johns Island, living there with Candie and their son permanently between 1963 and 1965. During this time, he organised folk festivals and experimented with a variety of projects designed to celebrate and rededicate the indigenous culture and compiled material that was later published as a book on the Sea Islands.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, such was their success, the citizenship schools had been exported back to Highlander for dissemination to other areas in the South. This success, however, had its drawbacks for Highlander. The work that Highlander conducted was best suited to small-scale programmes and the school's funding restricted the number of projects that could be undertaken at any one time. Committing Highlander staff and funds to the spread of the citizenship schools would erode the school's other projects. Highlander had always envisaged passing the citizenship schools on to another organisation once they had been established. As the 1959 Annual Report announced, 'the thought is that

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) p. 234; Carawan and Carawan (eds.), *Sing* p. 111; Carawans (eds.) *Ain't* p. 195.

<sup>65</sup> Final Report of the Edisto Adult School for 1959-1960. Quoted in Tjerandsen, *Education* p. 168.

<sup>66</sup> Carawans (eds.), *Ain't*. HREC box 67 folder 7 for material on the first Johns Island music festival.

the Folk School will stay in the local picture only long enough to help in developing local leaders who will continue to carry on an ever-growing program of community development.<sup>67</sup> The solution was to transform Highlander's role into one of teaching teachers. These trainees would then be sent back to their community to spread the gospel of citizenship, thus taking the strain off Highlander without diluting the project too much. Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson would assist local leaders in setting up their schools and then let the local leaders take charge. Schools would run in the community for three months of the year, with classes meeting twice weekly for two hours in the evening. Typical class numbers would be between 25 and 35 students, who were encouraged to bring friends and relatives to the meetings. This then would extend the local organising impulses of the civil rights movement, bringing more and more people into the front line of the freedom struggle.

The basic program of the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), as the initiative became known, was to educate black rural Southerners in the skills needed to become full citizens in Jim Crow (and post-Jim Crow) society. Initially the focus was placed on such requirements as basic literacy and passing the often rigorous tests that prevented many black southerners from gaining the vote, as had been the case on Johns Island. However, Clark's experiences taught her that education was not a linear progression towards gaining certain skills, but was an holistic process. Thus the curriculum of the CEP naturally broadened to encompass concepts that were pertinent to rural Southerners. Examples of this practical attitude abound in the CEP's Citizenship Workbook, produced to accompany its training program. In addition to the more traditional sound charts that feature such objects as boats, pigs, saws, churches and goats, the CEP included a word sheet, with instructions to construct sentences and stories from the various words, arranged according to their initial letter. Instead of apple, acorn and so on, 'a' featured attorney, amendments, abridged and alderman. 'R' included representatives, rebellion, register, resident and registration. Similarly, sound

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<sup>67</sup> Highlander 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, Sept 1959 p. 3.

charts, designed to aid in the recognition of various constructions of letters, featured pigs, churches, goats, roosters and quilts.<sup>68</sup> The CEP used other clearly identifiable teaching tools, such as in arithmetic, where amounts of fertiliser and numbers of cucumber seeds, for example, were used to illustrate arithmetic methods.<sup>69</sup> This devotion to ensuring the relevance of materials to the audience was central to the operation of the CEP, and was a calculated attempt to ground its work in the culture of the South. These exercises also complemented the Highlander ethos of questioning everything. A new reader finding out how to spell the word rebellion (a word that Sea Islanders might not have heard in context) would be encouraged to discuss and explore the meanings of the word. Thus the newly educated voters would become confident enough to discuss politics, rather than simply voting because they were told to.

The workbooks also featured the expected freedom songs, including ‘We Shall Overcome,’ which were sung at all meetings, and a large section on historical African American figures. This latter piece proves that the CEP – and, by association, the SCLC – was very much interested in using African American culture (in this instance, history) as a means to broadening and deepening its work. Intended to develop reading and analytic skills (the workbook asked questions about the extracts, such as ‘why do you think Sojourner Truth spoke against slavery?’ to stimulate debates), these extracts also grounded the students in their history and challenged the assumption that African Americans had no heroes from the past, whilst also challenging gender stereotypes.<sup>70</sup> Profiles of heroic African American figures such as Crispus Attucks and Benjamin Banneker illustrated concepts of slavery, freedom and education, and parallels were drawn between the historical tales and the present.<sup>71</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune’s story stressed the value of education, directly linking her childhood devotion to reading with

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<sup>68</sup> See SCLC Citizenship Workbook n.d., Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 4, reel 12 frames 0364-0365. Hereafter cited as SCLC.

<sup>69</sup> Septima Clark, interview with Eugene Walker, p. 7. Southern Oral History Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Hereafter cited as SOHC. See also Septima Clark interview with anonymous author, SHSW.

<sup>70</sup> SCLC Citizenship Workbook SCLC part 4, reel 12, frames 0382-0386.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* SCLC part 4, reel 12, frames 0382-0384.



her later success as an advisor to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.<sup>72</sup> In incorporating these exercises into the curriculum, the CEP ensured that history became a weapon in the freedom struggle. Where white schools emphasised the primacy of white history and asserted that black people comprised a subordinate race, the citizenship schools maintained that African Americans played a central role in the creation of the American nation. This idea was further emphasised by the singing of freedom songs, just as schoolchildren sang the national anthem at the beginning of the school day. Questions about the continuities and changes in African American life could be brought into a reading exercise, which then led to wider-ranging discussions on how to effect change – which itself could lead to a discussion on the need for voting. Therefore, whilst formerly illiterate adults were learning to read in order that they could vote, they were also learning – through discussion and through their own curiosity – about their history, culture, heritage and how they could use their vote to bring about change.

The CEP deliberately looked for potential leaders in the community to train in their techniques. Education did not matter. As Clark pointed out, ‘we didn’t need anyone with a high school education, nor did we need anyone with a college education. We just wanted to have a community person, so that the illiterates would feel comfortable and happy.’<sup>73</sup> All the trained citizenship school leaders used the CEP citizenship workbooks. Likewise, these leaders all learned how to lead the singing of freedom songs and were encouraged to make music an integral part of the curriculum. Meetings began and ended with communal singing of freedom songs in order to develop a sense of community, to further the literacy element of the schools and to emphasise the links between the civil rights movement and the CEP. Students would use the songs as a reading aid. This process ensured the (oral) transmission and (written) preservation of a vital element of African American culture. Thus music, history and folk culture remained at the centre of the citizenship schools, even in an informal setting.

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* SCLC part 4, reel 12, frames 0385-0386.

<sup>73</sup> Septima Clark, interview with Eugene Walker pp. 3-4. SOHC.

## Conclusion

By ensuring that both the material and those disseminating it related to the local community, and that locals felt comfortable with both, Highlander ensured that the CEP became an integral part of the 1960s freedom struggle. By 1961, Highlander was planning to expand the citizenship schools to reach 90,000 potential voters over the course of 12 months. Teachers had already been trained to work with the Southeastern Georgia Crusade for Voters, the Chatham County Crusade for Voters of Savannah, Georgia, the Montgomery Improvement Association and the SCLC, with 21 classes being run biweekly in south-east Georgia alone.<sup>74</sup> Even the infamous police raid of Highlander on 31 July 1959 and the subsequent court order closing down the folk school did not hinder the expansion of the CEP: Myles Horton had already made plans to transfer the CEP to the SCLC.<sup>75</sup>

The SCLC was initially sceptical of the value of Clark's work. It is possible that, for the SCLC, her work with mostly illiterate and barely literate people did not project the correct image to mainstream America. The lack of integration in the citizenship schools also clashed with the SCLC's commitment to integration. The SCLC was busy in the early 1960s promoting the humanity and decency of African Americans; its demonstrations were designed to illustrate the point that black Southerners were as human as their white brethren. Conversely, Clark's work suggested that many African Americans were ignorant of much outside their immediate surroundings. However, the SCLC, and Martin Luther King especially, were won over by Clark's insistence that their programme of demonstrations and creative use of community tension did not necessarily lead to concrete results. She, on the other hand, was easily able to demonstrate the success of the citizenship schools simply by producing lists of the

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<sup>74</sup> See 'The Citizenship School Program: A Proposal for South-wide Voter Education' p. 3. for a statistical survey of the numbers enrolled and registered as part of the CEP by June 1961.

<sup>75</sup> Glen, *Highlander* pp. 231-233; also Brown (ed.), *Ready* pp. 56-59.

number of blacks who had successfully registered to vote after attending classes.<sup>76</sup> By late 1960, the SCLC's Public Relations Director, James R. Wood, was arguing that the organisation needed a leadership development programme at the grass roots level and, 'the plan now in use by Highlander meets our needs with very minor changes.'<sup>77</sup> The rapid growth of SNCC also preyed on Wood's mind. The success of the student sit-ins and their implicit rejection of Martin Luther King's leadership had taken the SCLC by surprise. At the end of 1960, with little finances and no field staff, the SCLC was still in an infant state. It had not yet decided to embark on mass nonviolent direct action but was concentrating its energies on voter registration. For Wood, the CEP provided an opportunity for the SCLC to develop its own networks and expand its influence at the local level. Martin Luther King became similarly convinced, as is illustrated by his 1962 assertion to the Field Foundation: the CEP 'is one of the most important ventures underway in this nation and we are anxious to see it continue in the most effective manner. This program is the sole effort to deal with the problem of cultural lag due to racial deprivation on a South-wide level.'<sup>78</sup> It made perfect sense that Septima Clark follow her programme to the SCLC, where she became Director of Workshops and the conscience of the organisation, not to mention a feminist thorn in the side of the organisation's notoriously masculine central clique.

The CEP proved to be one of the SCLC's most extensive and long-lasting grass-roots initiatives. Trickle-down registration was indisputably effective. Between July 1962 and June 1963, 395 people received instruction in five-day workshops at the SCLC's Dorchester Center, near McIntosh, Georgia, with 366 going on to run citizenship classes, which attracted 5,623 students. The SCLC projected that 17,575

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<sup>76</sup> Many texts suggest that the transfer of the CEP to the SCLC was a simple process. See for example, Adams with Horton, *Unearthing* p. 118; Branch, *Parting* pp. 381-382; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 69-70, 95; David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1988) pp. 149-151. Carl Tjerandsen uses the Schwartzhaupt Foundation files to suggest the reticence of the SCLC and John Glen notes King's initial disinclination to take on the CEP. Tjerandsen, *Education* p. 181, Glen, *Highlander* p. 203.

<sup>77</sup> James R. Wood, letter to Highlander staff, 23 November 1960. SCLC part 4 reel 2 frame 0532.

<sup>78</sup> Martin Luther King to Maxwell Hahn, 13 February 1962. SCLC part 4 reel 2, frame 0488.

people registered to vote under the influence of the CEP during this period. Between June and November 1963, the CEP touched another 3,692 people, and influenced a further 9,575 to register in the eleven states in which it was active.<sup>79</sup> Within four years of the transfer of the CEP, nearly 900 citizenship schools were in operation at a cost of \$250,000 per year.<sup>80</sup> The SCLC estimated that 25,000 people attended classes in that time, over 1,400 of them at Dorchester, resulting in the registration of over 50,000 new voters.<sup>81</sup> On average, every Dorchester trainee produced between 35 and 67 new voters, an exceptional success rate. But that is not the entire story. It is highly significant that most of these new voters had been instructed in African American history by fellow African Americans and had been encouraged to develop a questioning attitude towards their lives and the system around them. In doing so, their own culture was legitimised and utilised to ensure their own personal development and in doing so, the foundations of the most ambitious of the programmes of the civil rights movement had been laid. To forget the value of the teaching style and the role that indigenous culture played in the education of these people would be to commit a severe underestimation of its impact. Although it was not given as much priority as direct action, the SCLC's sponsorship of the CEP suggests that the organisation held a commitment to the black underclass in the South and that it appreciated the wider perspective of the freedom struggle.

Highlander's contribution to the civil rights movement's ideology was a crucial step in acknowledging the protest value of African American culture. The freedom

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<sup>79</sup> CEP Progress Report, June-November 1963. SCLC part 4 reel 3 frame 0002. The CEP was active in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

<sup>80</sup> Maxwell Hahn, Executive Vice-President of the Field Foundation letter to Dr. Wesley Hotchkiss (American Missionary Association), 9 April 1963, SCLC part 4 reel 2 frame 0486; Myles Horton letter to Wyatt Walker, 22 August 1961 p. 1 states that the average monthly cost of each citizenship school was \$113.12. HREC box 38 folder 3. The CEP covered trainees' transport, room and board if they were not able to fund themselves. It also funded the establishment of local citizenship schools on the trainees' return to their communities. The cost was covered by grants from the Field Foundation, which also granted funds to a number of southern voter registration projects during the 1960s.

<sup>81</sup> Figures from SCLC CEP report by Septima Clark, delivered to Highlander Board of Directors, 14 May 1965 p. 2. HREC box 2 folder 3. In her CEP proposal to the SCLC, Clark claimed that approximately 95,000 voters had registered in the same period. It is difficult to ascertain which is the more accurate figure. In the same proposal she places the number of students who had attended classes at 23,839. See Septima Clark, CEP proposal c. 1965. SCLC part 4, reel 11, frame 0252.

songs spread from the school throughout the movement. Indeed, they have become as central to the narrative of the civil rights movement as the March on Washington and, possibly, Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. They not only provided a soundtrack to the movement's marches and demonstrations but also offered significant psychological armour for its participants. Jailed protesters did not simply sing to while away the time: the songs were both release from temporal surroundings and a message to the white authorities that their prisoners were not afraid. Furthermore, the songs provided a crucial link between the 1960s struggle and its antecedents. The fusion of white and black cultural traditions gelled perfectly with the integrationist message of the mature civil rights movement. The freedom songs used the historical memory of slavery and freedom to invoke African American culture as a movement weapon. In legitimising and popularising this culture, Highlander ensured that movement culture drew on and integrated itself with a wider tradition of oppositional culture.

Highlander also ensured that, away from the mass marches, the movement educated the black population to become full citizens and helped them to rediscover their historical memory. Citizenship education involved much more than simply providing a education to vote. It again legitimised a culture of opposition that ran through African American history and fed on a southern culture within the black community that had been dismissed by white society. The pedagogical concepts that Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson used ensured that the CEP spoke directly to black southerners and that cultural traditions such as storytelling remained valid. Highlander also convinced many SNCC activists that low-level grassroots work was vital to the movement's success. Its model for voter registration and education became central to SNCC's *modus operandi* and differentiated the organisation from its peers in the movement. Behind the laudatory image of Highlander's liberating atmosphere lay a determined and focused attempt to perpetuate African American cultural traditions in tandem with a commitment to ending oppressive practice.

## 2.

### **Tentative Steps: The civil rights organisations and African American culture, 1960-1963**

SNCC, CORE and the SCLC made limited use of culture as an organising tool between 1960 and 1963. Their appreciation of the value of culture to organising black Americans was limited by the philosophies of the three organisations and by their focus on political freedom. Although SNCC increasingly became aware of the need for psychological freedom during this period, CORE and the SCLC limited their philosophies to a focus on political and social freedom. The SCLC's overtly religious outlook restricted the organisation's interpretation of culture, whereas CORE found its national policy limited by its lack of a philosophy that extended beyond politics. Conversely, CORE's refusal to dictate policy to its individual chapters and activists opened it up to the cultural impulse that was to become increasingly important to the movement.

In the early 1960s, the cultural impulse within the mainstream movement revolved around the use of Christianity. The overtly religious aura of the SCLC indicated to many that the movement sprang from the well of the African American church. While the freedom songs were the most visible cultural manifestation of the movement, they were generally also its only deep engagement with secular culture. Given the overtly religious tone of the SCLC's work, it is to a certain degree unsurprising that the organisation de-emphasised secular culture as an organising tool. However, the SCLC did adopt Highlander's Citizenship Education Program, leaving

Septima Clark to continue her work in the development of a new political culture in the South that was in part based on the legitimisation of rural African American culture.

SNCC, taking influence from Highlander, began to appreciate the importance of folk culture to local organising whilst undergoing a subtle transformation from a Christian organisation to a more secular, existentialist group. SNCC tapped into the freedom songs, even using them as a fundraising tool through its singing group, the Freedom Singers. It augmented its work with other forms of African American culture, embracing, for example, the comedian Dick Gregory's idiosyncratic contributions to its Greenwood campaign. Psychological freedom was central to SNCC's philosophy. In south-west Georgia, SNCC activists including Charles Sherrod discovered the value of independent 'freedom' schools and community centres in developing indigenous protest movements and breaking local people's dependence on outside organisers. The Southwest Georgia Project's work led directly to SNCC's most famous venture, the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project. For SNCC, indigenous African American culture became increasingly important in the development of the civil rights movement.

During this period, CORE envisaged an explicitly political movement, also grounded in Gandhian philosophy. Its programme centred around voter registration, although individual chapters were given a certain amount of autonomy to develop their own tactics and strategies. The example of Berkeley CORE and the work of Dave Dennis in Mississippi illustrate how certain CORE activists were able to move the organisation into an engagement with the cultural sphere and also the inertia of CORE's leadership.

## **SCLC**

Between 1960 and 1963 the SCLC cemented itself as the most visible of the civil rights organisations operating in the South. It is somewhat predictable, given the organisation's overtly religious nature, that secular culture was not central to its

ideology. There is insufficient material to make a plausible case that the SCLC was openly interested in extending its struggle into the cultural sphere before 1964. Undoubtedly, the SCLC's concern with projecting a respectable, middle-class image played a part in this, as did the social position of the SCLC's hierarchy. However, beneath the SCLC's public image, it was engaging more subtly with folk culture. Its adoption of Highlander's Citizenship Education Program offered tacit approval of Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson's use of folk culture to spread literacy in the South and, naturally, the organisation acknowledged the power and utility of the freedom songs – particularly those that had not been secularised.

For King and the SCLC, African American culture was effectively defined by the church. The organisation was firmly of the opinion that Christianity was the culture of the movement. Its organisational strategy did not lend itself effectively to using popular or folk culture as a political weapon. The SCLC's large-scale campaigns of nonviolent direct action relied on the charisma of its leadership to generate a Christian commitment to nonviolence and a willingness to suffer. This reliance on preachers meant that the SCLC's long-term commitments to a community were centred on the church. However, that the SCLC ensured that the CEP continued to utilise folk culture in its programme suggests that the organisation tacitly approved of Highlander's tactics. Although the SCLC would have been in favour of imposing a Christian theology on the CEP, Septima Clark's obstinacy ensured that the CEP remained a secular programme that fused folk culture with activism.

Part of the SCLC's lack of cultural focus lies in its organising tendencies. The leadership of the organisation was predominantly drawn from the ministry and most SCLC meetings were held under the roof of the church. The SCLC was also a classic definition of a leadership centred group, where ideas and leadership originated from within the central circle of members to be distributed amongst the followers. Thus there was relatively little reliance on local leaders and their ways, as established through the example of Hosea Williams. Whilst some of the success of his projects can be attributed



to his dynamic leadership, Williams had a tendency to transform SCLC initiatives into his own, autonomous power bases which, coupled with his abrasive and somewhat egotistic style, alienated his underlings.<sup>1</sup> Williams led an idiosyncratic citizenship education campaign that abandoned Highlander's belief in holistic education and simply taught students the minimum requirement to register to vote before leaving the people to continue as before. He had no qualms with the criticism that this procedure did little to break the cycle of dependency that enabled whites to corrupt the sanctity of the vote through intimidation and corruption.<sup>2</sup> The Southeast Georgia Crusade for Voters was truly in the Christian tradition of one leader and many followers.

Although Williams was the most leadership-centred of the SCLC leaders, his example illustrates the SCLC's reliance on the dynamism of its leadership. Since these men were all preachers, it is understandable that they emphasised Christianity as the true culture of the black South. Martin Luther King did not elaborate on his conception of secular culture during this period, nor did his appropriation of non-Christian philosophies extend to cultural considerations. His interpretation of Gandhi concentrated on nonviolence and loving one's enemy, rather than with Gandhi's struggle against psychological oppression, as established in his opposition to the imposition of a British education and legal system on India. For Sudarshan Kapur, King's Christianity led him to understand the redemptive power of love: from Gandhi,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Tuck mentions the resentment of SCOPE (Summer Community Organizing and Political Education) workers under Williams' leadership during 1965 but downplays Williams' egotism, only mentioning it in a footnote. Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2001) pp. 199, 285 n.1; David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1986) p. 464 for Williams' frank admission that ego kept him in the movement; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 94-95 for brief information on Williams' leadership style.

<sup>2</sup> John Due, memo to Wiley Branton, 're Field Trip Throughout Georgia, August 17-21 1964,' 1 September 1964. Southern Regional Council Papers, Library of Congress microfilm reel 176, frames 1644-1645; discussion between Williams and Septima Clark at Highlander regarding education, 'Experimental Workshop on Adult Education' 21 January 1961. Highlander Research and Education Center records, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) Audio Collection cassette 206, sides 2 and 3.

he took 'the notion of actively confronting evil' with this love.<sup>3</sup> King, too, was aware of the power of the singing culture that was developing amongst the civil rights protesters in the early 1960s, as he confessed in November 1961. King asserted that 'We Shall Overcome' was an expression of hope and faith in progress, even in the face of hostility and violence. Although he did not explicitly link the song with its Christian roots, he acknowledged that it provided a similar backbone to the students' strength that Christianity did for the leaders of the SCLC.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it dovetailed neatly with King's Hegelian conception of history as a story of progress. In practice, the campaigns of the early 1960s illustrated to the SCLC that the freedom songs were a vital component of the movement. As Andrew Young revealed in July 1964,

music has been the backbone of the Freedom Movement... freedom songs have done as much for inspiring our students as all the teaching and preaching. There is a liberating effect that comes from shouting and clapping to songs which express the long suppressed desire for freedom within the Negro.<sup>5</sup>

The Albany campaign of 1961 and 1962 made the SCLC acutely aware of the value of African American culture to the movement. For a time, King and the SCLC were able to exploit the fervour that erupted from the mass meetings through song, and it was precisely this rapture that the organisation tried to replicate in Birmingham and subsequent campaigns. However, outwitted by the local Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett, the SCLC was forced to leave Albany without extracting any concrete desegregation agreements from the local authorities. Despite the political failure, one of the most important results of Albany, as Clayborne Carson notes, was the new awareness of SNCC workers that the freedom struggle had a cultural dimension.<sup>6</sup> For

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<sup>3</sup> Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up A Prophet: the African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience' address delivered before the annual meeting of the Fellowship of the Concerned, 16 November 1961, James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Young, letter to Septima Clark, 20 July 1964. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 4 reel 12, frames 0729-0730. Hereafter cited as SCLC.

<sup>6</sup> Clayborne Carson, 'SNCC and the Albany Movement' *The Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 2 (fall 1984) p. 23. For narratives of the campaign, *ibid.* pp. 15-25; Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) pp. 524-559, 602-632; Clayborne

SNCC activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, the campaign in Albany was the first time that she became fully aware of the close relationship between culture and struggle.<sup>7</sup>

## SNCC

For SNCC as well, Albany was an epiphany. King's actions revealed to a number of SNCC workers that the SCLC and 'De Lawd' had different objectives to their young cohorts. For SNCC activists, Albany also revealed the unique power of the freedom songs. Although the songs had been introduced to SNCC in 1960, at Albany they were transformed into something altogether more transcendental and more reflective of African American culture. James Forman attests that they were the most important factor in creating the spirit of the campaign. Local activist Goldie Jackson concurred, adding that 'two things we knew held us together: prayer of something good to come and song that tells from the depth of the heart how we feel about our fellow man.'<sup>8</sup> Crucially, at Albany, church leaders allowed SNCC to manipulate mass meetings through its song leaders. From this position, Bernice Johnson Reagon and other SNCC activists were able to transform spirituals into explicitly political songs. New verses were inserted into the spiritual 'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around', giving notice that Mayor Kelly and Chief Pritchett were not going to turn the protesters around.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Reagon substituted 'freedom' for 'trouble' in the spiritual 'Over My Head (I see trouble in the air)' in a process that reflected both her religious and political sensibilities. Reagon transformed the spiritual's sense of foreboding into an expression of destiny that was filtered through the political message of the Albany movement. This

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Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 56-65; Fairclough, *To Redeem* pp. 85-109.

<sup>7</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon interview with Therese Spaude, 27 January 1982 SHSW cassette 1303A side 1.

<sup>8</sup> James Forman, *The Making Of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985) p. 260; Jackson quoted in Pat Watters, *Down To Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1971) p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Branch, *Parting* p. 532; Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.), *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1990) p. 62.

singing continued even when the protesters were jailed, helping to raise spirits and maintain communication between cells. And 'We Shall Overcome' was ubiquitous.<sup>10</sup>

From its inception SNCC was the most irreverent and single-minded of the major civil rights organisations. Under the influence of Ella Baker, SNCC adopted a disregard for compromise and a firm belief in following its heart as well as its head, characteristics that remained constant amid the turbulence of SNCC's politics in the 1960s. Initially overtly Christian in outlook, the organisation also explored existentialism, Marxism and black nationalism as its experiences inexorably drew it towards a thorough critique of American society's ills. This journey can be traced in the culture that permeated the group. In the early 1960s, under the influence of Highlander and the students from the Nashville movement, the freedom songs (many of them Christian) were hugely important both to the psychology of SNCC staff and to SNCC operations. As the organisation moved away from direct action towards community organising, folk culture became more important, particularly that which was indigenous to the Black Belt in the South. As James Forman told Myles Horton, cultural programmes were to be an integral part of SNCC training programmes in local communities.<sup>11</sup>

The SNCC Freedom Singers were the best known attempt of any of the civil rights organisations to harness the power of the freedom songs as a fund- and consciousness-raising tool. Formed by members of the Albany campaign in 1962, the Freedom Singers performed in front of movement participants wherever SNCC operated. The group was founded by Cordell Reagon of SNCC, soon after he joined the Albany campaign, and featured Bernice Johnson Reagon, Rutha Harris, Charles Neblett

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<sup>10</sup> Carawan and Carawan (eds.) *Sing* p. 77; interview with unidentified female protester in Albany campaign, Guy Carawan Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, cassette FT3696: Civil Rights Material; Reagon interview with Spaude, side 1.

<sup>11</sup> James Forman, letter to Myles Horton, 10 May 1962. Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 5 frame 0926. Hereafter cited as SNCC.

and Reagon himself.<sup>12</sup> Cordell Reagon was credited with introducing ‘We Shall Overcome’ to the Albany campaign: he learned it at Highlander.

The Freedom Singers made their official debut on 11 November 1962, in a joint concert with Pete Seeger. They performed in churches, meeting halls, streets and even in the jails when they were incarcerated, providing a psychological boost to jailed activists. They also travelled far beyond the region in which SNCC was active, visiting college campuses throughout the nation in an attempt to raise awareness of and funds for the Southern movement. As Bernice Johnson Reagon writes, ‘with the need to gather supporters and disseminate information on the Civil Rights Movement, the music gained increased importance as a means of conveying the nature and intensity of the struggle to audiences outside the geography of Movement activity.’<sup>13</sup> The Freedom Singers were able to exploit the distance between northern campuses and the movement by pricking the consciousness of students and liberals through their performances. The success of these tours generated national exposure and funds for SNCC, and led to an appearance by the group at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival.

Much like Zilphia Horton, the Freedom Singers considered their work to be both entertainment and education. The Freedom Singers’ performances included their own *a cappella* singing, readings about the movement and commentary on the songs’ creation and reasons for their use in the movement. The Freedom Singers went north ‘with the express purpose of trying to break through to people who would hear about the movement and utilising music as a way to do that,’ overcoming any news restrictions that might have been operational in these areas.<sup>14</sup> As Charles Neblett indicated,

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<sup>12</sup> By 1964, the group’s personnel had changed, with Emory Harris replacing his sister, James Peacock, Rafael Bentham, Matthew and Marshall Jones all joining the group, with the two Reagons departing, leaving Neblett at the core of the new group. The existing records do not suggest why this was the case. Charles Neblett later joined the Black Panther Party, but did not sing whilst a member. SNCC press release re: the Freedom Singers n.d. SNCC reel 19 frame 0681; SNCC press release re: Freedom Singers tour July 1965 SNCC reel 37 frame 0599; Emory Douglas, interview with author, San Francisco 28 June 2001. Author’s collection.

<sup>13</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, ‘Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History’ (PhD thesis, Howard University, 1975) p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> Reagon interview with Spaude side 2.

‘Newspapers and UPI often won’t give the real story and SNCC had to find another way to get it out.’<sup>15</sup> Prior to the 1964 Summer Project, many northern students interested in the movement found themselves without an outlet for this interest. Attending fundraising concerts and listening to movement activists provided a certain psychological release. Whilst the songs might not have brought about a revolutionary change on the campuses, they certainly exposed northern students to the urgency of the southern struggle.

There is a small paradox in the Freedom Singers’ relationship with their audience. Reagon later confirmed that part of the remit of the Freedom Singers was to exploit the orality of Southern black culture. Given the low literacy rate in the South, it is not surprising that SNCC used oral culture as an organising tool. However, performances in the North were almost always in front of a literate audience (SNCC had not yet moved towards ghetto organising). This then raises an important question: were the Freedom Singers engaged in a form of minstrelsy?<sup>16</sup> One might point to the fact that the Freedom Singers were performing for predominantly white middle-class audiences who were there for a vicarious experience. Most audience members were unable or unwilling to put their lives on the line and so put their money where their mouths could have been. They were also there to witness an expression of a potentially exotic and strange black culture. The question as to whether the Freedom Singers were performing, as opposed to educating, remains. Were they exoticising their roots in order to raise funds? To what extent were the audiences being encouraged to interpret black culture as anomalous to white American culture? Reagon firmly resists these questions by asserting the Freedom Singers’ authenticity and integrity but is understandably uncomfortable with the suggestion that their performances did not generate exactly the response that they intended. She argues that this process was a straightforward case of

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<sup>15</sup> Neblett quoted in Reagon ‘Songs’ p. 140;

<sup>16</sup> For minstrelsy, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) pp. 244-301.

bringing a minority culture to the majority to create a channel of communication.<sup>17</sup> Through attending these concerts, northern students were made aware of and encouraged to join a youth movement that might otherwise have simply been a news item. The performances were also interspersed with commentary on the movement to encourage the audience to link the entertainment with the serious social issues behind it.

Through these methods the Freedom Singers intended to prick the conscience of their northern audiences. The songs were used primarily to help tell the story of the southern movement, rather than to display a southern African American cultural trait. Whilst the Freedom Singers acknowledged the entertainment value of their work, the serious message behind the song was of prime importance. They considered their audiences to be sympathetic to the cause rather than curious whites hoping to catch a glimpse of what made black culture so attractive. The group did not assume a 'mask' to perform – the songs and the story was their life and they expected their audiences to understand, respect and, hopefully, support it. The Freedom Singers made a considerable contribution to SNCC's campaigns, doing much to cement the organisation's status on campus and insisting that African American culture was a central element of the freedom struggle.

When a SNCC representative invited Dick Gregory to donate to a 1963 food drive for the black residents of Leflore County, Mississippi, the intention was to utilise Gregory's celebrity status to highlight the county's withdrawal from a federal programme that supplied surplus food to the deprived. Gregory's contribution, however, not only brought the national media to Greenwood but also illustrated how the civil rights movement intertwined with African American culture. The comic had become a rich man through his success on the comedy circuit, but the movement so affected him that he dedicated himself to activism and philanthropy. He first became aware of racial discrimination at school in St. Louis, Missouri. After having his school track records not listed in the scholastic record due to his colour, Gregory joined a PTA march about

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<sup>17</sup> Reagon interview with Spaude side 2.

overcrowding in black schools to protest, using his position as a local star to attract the media. Gregory's activism took a back seat to his burgeoning stand-up comedy career during the 1950s. However, civil rights issues began to find their way into his act: 'they asked me to buy a lifetime membership in the NAACP, but I told them I'd pay a week at a time. Hell of a thing to buy a lifetime membership, wake up one morning and find the country's been integrated,' he cracked to his regular black Chicago audience.<sup>18</sup> By 1960, Gregory was performing in benefits for CORE and the NAACP and had honed his race material to a fine point: 'good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' Gregory would begin,

I understand there are a good many Southerners in the room tonight. I know the South very well. I spent twenty years there one night... It's dangerous for me to go back South. You see, when I drink, I think I'm Polish. One night I got so drunk I moved out of my own neighborhood... Last time I was down South, I walked into this restaurant. This white waitress came up to me and said, "we don't serve colored people in here." I said, "that's all right, I don't eat colored people, no way! Bring me a whole fried chicken."<sup>19</sup>

Despite this bravado, Gregory was worried about violent reprisals when Medgar Evers invited him to speak at some NAACP rallies in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962. Part of Gregory's fear derived from his knowledge that the local NAACP headquarters were on Lynch Street.<sup>20</sup> Gregory claims that his experience in Jackson was the real turning point in his life. After hearing the story of an old man whose wife of 60 years died on the night – their first apart – that he was jailed for leading a voter registration drive, Gregory chose to devote his life to the movement. He forever refused simply to

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<sup>18</sup> Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1964) pp. 85, 126-145, quote p. 148; Dick Gregory with Sheila P. Moses, *Callus On My Soul: A Memoir* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 2000) pp. 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory and Moses, *Callus* p. 47. See Gregory and Lipsyte, *Nigger* p. 168 for details on benefits for CORE and the NAACP; SCLC newsletter 1,2 (August 1961) p. 2 for details on benefit concert that Gregory took part in for the SCLC on 18 June 1961. SCLC part 3 reel 4 frame 00215.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory and Lipsyte, *Nigger* p. 172; Gregory and Moses, *Callus* pp. 52-53. It is likely that the street was actually named for John R. Lynch, a Reconstruction-era Black Republican congressman (43<sup>rd</sup> Congress) who had also served as Speaker of the House in the Mississippi legislature between 1872 and 1873. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) pp. 354 n.15, 538.



lend his name to campaigns, insisting instead that 'if it's an organization I can work with, I'll work.'<sup>21</sup>

Gregory took his response to SNCC to its logical extreme, transporting over 14,000 pounds of food to Mississippi before immersing himself in the campaign.<sup>22</sup> Gregory headed marches, inspired the locals and brought his comedy act into the heart of the movement. Charles Payne credits Gregory with forcing Greenwood ministers to sign a petition endorsing the freedom movement after months of equivocation.<sup>23</sup> Just as his position as a school track star had attracted the media in St. Louis, Gregory brought national attention to Greenwood. His first arrest in Greenwood was front page news in the *New York Times*, which also faithfully reported Gregory openly taunting the Chief of Police.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, local officials feared the national publicity that assaulting or arresting Gregory would bring. Aware of this, Gregory invited his wife and new-born son to join in the fun and transformed each demonstration into a confrontational performance described as 'so daring as to be touched by madness or sublime inspiration.'<sup>25</sup> Gregory's example proved to be a beacon of hope and inspiration for the local people, proving that a black man could, firstly, become a success, secondly, demand respect from whites and thirdly, receive it.

Gregory did not only perform at demonstrations. He also gave benefit concerts for local people in the evenings. These performances were a vital part of the Greenwood campaign, giving much needed relief from the pressures of daily harassment and violence and encouraging audiences to take a slightly detached view of life in the South. It is notable that Gregory's quips were met with applause rather than laughter. In

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory and Lipsyte, *Nigger* pp. 173-175, quote p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory and Moses, *Callus* p. 62; Branch, *Parting* p. 713; Ivanhoe Donaldson oral history, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1990) p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got The Light Of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) pp. 198-199.

<sup>24</sup> 'Dick Gregory Defies Police in South,' *New York Times* 3 April 1963 pp. 1, 40, quote p. 40. The Greenwood police were most likely less concerned with Gregory's appearance in *Jet* magazine whilst demonstrating. 'Should Negro Stars Join Freedom Fight?' *Jet* 24,3 (9 May 1963) pp. 20-24.

<sup>25</sup> Branch, *Parting* p. 722.

Chicago, his act focused on the absurdity of a life that the audience might only have known through their ancestors. Furthermore, although discrimination was very real in Chicago, there was a tacit acceptance of the black population. In Greenwood he was revealing truths to his audience. They understood what Gregory meant when he said that he had spent twenty years in the South one night. They also knew the absurdity of the situation when Gregory noted that if the white man 'really believes we was really inferior to him, he would integrate his schools tomorrow and we would flunk out by noon.' They responded with a metaphorical nod when Gregory asserted that, 'here's a man that didn't have enough intelligence to know that if you want to segregate someone and really keep 'em down, you put 'em upfront! He made the great mistake of putting us in the back. So for 300 years, we've been watching *him*.' In Greenwood, Gregory went on to dissect black violence, observing that,

this man... have [*sic*] accused us of having the number one crime rate in America, and I wonder if you ever stopped and asked yourself, have we? We haven't put 40 sticks of dynamite in momma's luggage and blew one of them airplanes out of the sky! And you know I don't care what they say about us, we ain't never lynched nobody, man!<sup>26</sup>

In Greenwood, Gregory cast himself as a classic artist-activist. His professional routine was irrevocably changed by his experiences in the movement, and eventually he decided to abandon his comedy in favour of full-time activism, putting his talents at the full disposal of whichever organisation wanted him. 'I wanted Black and oppressed people to be free,' he claims. 'My career was interfering with my demonstrating.'<sup>27</sup> His comedy became an interface between African American oral culture and the civil rights movement. Following the Greenwood campaign, Gregory helped the SCLC in Birmingham, taking his first 'butt kicking' into the bargain. Only the death of his son

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<sup>26</sup> Dick Gregory, performance at evening meeting in Greenwood, circa 1963. Guy Carawan collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, cassette 3690: Civil Rights Material – Greenwood documentary, side B.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory and Moses, *Callus* p. 83.

pulled him away from the thrill of being on the front line of the movement, and even that only temporarily halted Gregory's activism.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the money SNCC raised as a result of the national exposure that Gregory brought, the organisation benefited from the psychological relief that his presence and his material brought. His guerrilla street theatre provided light entertainment and a crucial underlying message – namely that African Americans should not be pushed around. Furthermore, if Taylor Branch is correct, the publicity that he brought coerced the Justice Department to pressure Greenwood officials to refrain from harassing black citizens who tried to register to vote, quash the convictions of eight SNCC workers who had tried to facilitate voter registration and provide police protection at the registration office.<sup>29</sup> SNCC was also able to motivate people through Gregory's example. Local activists were encouraged to share a platform with Gregory and learn that they too had leadership qualities.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst also establishing how SNCC related culture to the freedom movement, these examples reveal the importance of the individual to SNCC. It relied on the dedication of its staff for its continued viability, declining to impose membership fees. Staff were paid subsistence (sometimes sub-subsistence) wages. SNCC's success was largely down to the dedication of its members for initiatives such as the folk festivals and the Freedom Singers tours. In addition, the influence of the so-called "floaters" who supported Bob Moses and the concept of the "freedom high" pushed SNCC at times

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* pp. 71-75, quote p. 71. For further examples of Gregory's commitment see Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement And The Sixties: Protest in America for Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 50, 70; Taylor Branch, *Pillar Of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) pp. 67, 71; David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) pp. 122-123; Forman, *Making*, pp. 303-4; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (New York: Da Capo, 1995) p. 184; Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow Of The Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1994) p. 60; William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 84, 126, 128; Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) pp. 141, 148; Malcolm X, 'At the Audubon' speech, 13 December 1964 in George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) pp. 98-100; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) pp. 150-151.

<sup>29</sup> Branch, *Parting* p. 722.

<sup>30</sup> Payne, *I've Got* p. 260.

away from organisation and towards an even greater reliance on individual conscience. Many in SNCC instinctively felt that contributions should not be determined by the organisation but should be according to the skills of the individual – Gregory’s case is a perfect example. It is also worth noting that new volunteers were asked what they could do, rather than told what SNCC wanted them to do. These two inclinations merged together. SNCC never resisted the support of anybody, regardless of their political leanings, but also did not attempt to guide people towards what the organisation wanted. Tom Hayden, after observing SNCC activities in Albany, noted the ramifications of SNCC’s lack of didacticism. SNCC staff members, according to him, ‘made no attempt to control the actual movement, as SCLC representatives had done. They related well to the local people, obtained their full cooperation and were knowledgeable and skilled in their work.’<sup>31</sup> This attitude was particularly visible in SNCC’s local community operations in south-west Georgia. SNCC’s work here has been described as one of the two most important testing grounds for the organisation’s approach to community organising.<sup>32</sup> It is also an excellent example of how local organising, voter registration and SNCC’s philosophy intertwined with the role of culture as an organising tool.

Robert Mants, reporting from Americus, Georgia in October 1963, expressed frustration at the pace of change in the community, despite the successful running of a local freedom school and his efforts to establish protest in the area. For him, as for SNCC, it was imperative that, when freeing African Americans from physical oppression, the organisation addressed the issue of psychological freedom... [It is] the psychological freedom that our people, black folk, need.’ Mants contended that it was not enough merely to tell black people that the white man was not always right. In order to bring about psychological freedom, SNCC had to ‘let them know who they are, the things that they have contributed to the “civilized” world. I honestly think,’ mused Mants, ‘that if this is done, we’ll have *more* black faces turned to the sky and *less*

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<sup>31</sup> Tom Hayden, ‘Revolution in Albany’ 8 January 1962. SNCC reel 37 frame 0295.

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *In Struggle* p. 74.

crooks in our necks.’<sup>33</sup> The issue that Mants raises is crucial for an understanding of SNCC’s attitude towards the use of culture within the movement. Psychological freedom was arguably as important to SNCC as was physical and social freedom. And for SNCC, the local community was central to the achievement of this goal. SNCC workers were fiercely defensive of the rights of the individual and dedicated their work to developing local leaders. In doing so, the organisation aimed to develop rather than impose leadership, which would break the African American community’s reliance on outside leaders. When SNCC moved into a community, its first task was to register voters who could already pass the local requirements. A single activist could conduct this work. More activists, either as a result of other interested staff, a successful initial programme or more funding from SNCC, would then develop this work.

Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon arrived in Albany during autumn 1961 to establish a voter registration office.<sup>34</sup> Their work provided the backbone for SNCC’s later work. As the movement developed in the community, SNCC approached local schools to provide space for the development of a community centre. Once established this community centre would become the focus of the local movement and a valuable space for cultural activities, such as cinema presentations, reading groups or quilt-making sessions.<sup>35</sup> These community centres were a direct reflection of the influence of Highlander on SNCC. They were designed almost as micro-Highlanders, where the expertise of certain individuals would be used to spread organisational techniques and to preserve local cultures.

Following Sherrod and Reagon’s insinuation of SNCC into the community, more workers arrived in the area and SNCC began to spread into the surrounding region. The 1963 report on SNCC’s Southwest Georgia Project notes SNCC’s success

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<sup>33</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Robert Mants, Jr., ‘Report: Americus Georgia’ 5 October 1963 SNCC reel 17 frame 0067. Emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Zinn, *SNCC* pp. 125-126.

<sup>35</sup> See anon, ‘Survey: Current Field Work, Spring 1963’ pp. 3-4. Howard Zinn Papers, SHSW box 2 folder 9. Hereafter cited as ZP.

in the area, but emphasises that economic and social solutions do not result in complete freedom for the people. As the report notes, 'we count success by the number of minds freed to think as they will and act in proportion to their willingness to suffer.' Although the report looks toward a future without segregation, it acknowledges that the question of black response to this possibility is moot: 'the use of these facilities, whether a man will sit in the back or say "yes suh" or "Tom" or vote intelligently after he registers, has more to do with how a man sees himself in relation to other men.' Only when this happened would the twisted set of values inherent in the South be transformed, the power of the people be realised and 'the revolution in its tangible manifestations will take place.'<sup>36</sup> This statement succinctly denotes the fundamental difference between SNCC's conception of their work and that of, for example, Hosea Williams. Rather than simply giving people the right to vote, SNCC was interested in developing the individual's interest in the process of voting: it was just as important to ensure that a person was capable of choosing the best candidate, thus limiting the potential for further corruption. Williams, as has been established, considered the vote to be an end in itself.

The psychological freedom of black Southerners was a crucial aspect of the work in Georgia, and by extension, the work that SNCC was conducting in the rest of the South. In order to achieve this, SNCC believed that local culture played an important role. SNCC encouraged its workers to respect local traditions and differences in order to ensure that local people did not find themselves feeling inferior to the more cosmopolitan and educated SNCC activists. Thus their self-image would not be tarnished. To have imposed an homogenous black culture on such people would have clashed with SNCC's much-vaunted respect for the individual and, furthermore, would have suggested that local culture was worthless in the freedom struggle.

It is entirely plausible that, in south-west Georgia at least, frustrations with the pace of change led to deeper considerations about freedom and liberty. Those who had

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<sup>36</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from anonymous, 'Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals' 27 December 1963 p. 2. SNCC reel 37 frame 0950. The position of the report in the SNCC papers suggests that Charles Sherrod might be the author.

taken part in the Albany campaign suffered jail, frequent interference and extreme violence from the local white power structure. It comes as no surprise to discover that, by the summer of 1963, when the campaign in Albany had been going on for nearly two years, SNCC began to look more deeply at the ramifications of its work for the participants. During the summer SNCC workers canvassed local people to ask *how* they wanted SNCC to help them. As a result, an Adult Education Group was formed to address the desires of local residents to get an education, which first met on 1 October.<sup>37</sup>

During November and December, the entire staff of the Southwest Georgia Project discussed how to define the future of the project. They evaluated the success of their voter registration drives, the citizenship school that had recently been established, their adult education classes and the efficiency of their car pool. They reached few conclusions about the effectiveness of the programmes. Local people were apparently confused about the purpose of SNCC's work in the area. The stuttering summer project of 1963 had contributed to this, where a number of SNCC workers initiated various programmes without pursuing them to a conclusion and the presence of white volunteers added to the confusion of local people. Alongside renewing their commitment to the community, the report suggested that SNCC staff ensure that the community centre, which had been set up during the summer, be continued.<sup>38</sup> This community centre was to be the focus of SNCC operations in the area. It would be a place to meet the local people, interact with them on their level in a non-threatening environment. The suggested classes in, for example, handicrafts would emphasise the value of local customs and develop skills among the unskilled that would contribute to the lasting viability of local cultures. Aside from these cultural issues, SNCC's problems suggest that Myles Horton was wholly correct to assert that initiative needed to stem from local people to ensure the success of organising initiatives.

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<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 11-14. SNCC reel 37 frames 0954-0956.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 15. SNCC reel 37 frame 0956.

In the early planning stages of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, SNCC was already expanding its focus beyond political action. The Tougaloo Literacy Project, ‘a pilot effort in developing literacy materials which are related to the cultural environment,’ was an important part of the Mississippi plans.<sup>39</sup> Community centres were identified as an important factor in the work. They were to be a focal point for the community and a place where SNCC could operate safely and successfully. SNCC often occupied churches and school buildings to establish its community centres, aware that the community already considered such places to be a safe haven. When pressure from the local power structure became dangerous, SNCC was prepared to use local houses and, in some cases, build new centres. In addition to their function as a meeting place, the community centres were a place for training, where local people could learn new skills and a place for recreation, where films were shown, drama and reading groups met and where a library was available. These cultural facilities were expressly designed to meet the needs of a community that was not being served by the state and local government. What cinemas existed in black neighbourhoods were, as SNCC noted, ‘old, run-down... show[ing] mostly third-rate Hollywood productions.’<sup>40</sup> Libraries were either woefully under-funded or non-existent and there were no child care centres (a direct legacy of slaveholders demanding that slave children be sent to work as young as was possible), no health clinics, and definitely no employment and training centres for the black community. The SNCC community centres would address all these shortcomings and try to introduce a new and deeper conception of how to tackle the problems that faced black southerners.<sup>41</sup>

SNCC’s experience in the local community between 1961 and 1964 heavily influenced the organisation’s attitude towards the use of African American culture as an organising tool in the following two to three years. While the Freedom Singers toured

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<sup>39</sup> Anon, ‘Outline for Maureen Murphy’ December 1963. p. 5. Mendy Samstein papers, SHSW. The hand-written notes on the document suggest that Mendy Samstein wrote it.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> See ZP, box 3 folder 11 for material on the growth of SNCC’s adult literacy work in Selma, Alabama between 1963 and 1964.



the country, attracting exposure and funds, SNCC workers fanned out into the South, developing a network of community centres that stimulated local activism. Through its contact with the community, SNCC became aware of the vibrancy of local cultures and dedicated itself to respecting these traditions. SNCC's work in the community gives an indication of how it was willing to embrace popular and folk culture as organising tools. Furthermore, it establishes the roots of SNCC's 1964 Summer Project and its later assertion that African American culture was a viable unifying force for the civil rights movement. Indeed, SNCC's cultural impulse after the Summer Project was predicated on the viability and vibrancy of local – specifically African American – cultures.

## **CORE**

CORE also used the freedom songs as fund raisers, producing a long-playing record of the *Songs of the Freedom Riders*, which included the activists' rendition of 'Hit The Road, Jack,' re-titled 'Get Your Rights, Jack,' and featured the vocals of Floyd McKissick's daughter, Joycelyn.<sup>42</sup> However, while the organisation accepted the worth of the freedom songs to the movement, it primarily used them for fund-raising. In fact, CORE's entire ethos between 1960 and 1963 acknowledged the role of culture but the organisation did little to embrace popular and folk culture as organising tools. While SNCC was beginning to appreciate the value of local culture to organising, CORE stressed the political overtones of its local activism. CORE's relationship with its constituency was in many way similar to that of Hosea Williams. Just as Williams emphasised the importance of increasing the number of African American registered voters, CORE focused its work on voter registration. It too did not acknowledge the value of developing independent thought among the new voters. For CORE's southern operation, numbers were of prime importance.

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<sup>42</sup> 'Liner Notes for 'Sit In Songs: Songs of the Freedom Riders,' n.d. CORE series 5 box 35 folder 8.

Between 1960 and 1963, CORE sought to cement itself as one of the premier national civil rights organisations. It spent a great deal of time attempting to devise a worthy sequel to the Freedom Rides. It also set about registering southern blacks with zeal whilst attempting to re-establish itself in the major urban centres of the North. Although CORE made faltering attempts to utilise culture as an organising tool, the failure of its cultural committee and its reticence to grapple with the indigenous culture of the South suggests that the organisation had a limited appreciation of the value of popular and folk culture to the movement. That it was willing to utilise James Baldwin's position as a prominent African American, however, suggests that CORE was willing to embrace 'high' culture to increase its exposure. Furthermore, the autonomy granted to individual chapters such as Berkeley CORE and activists such as Dave Dennis sheds revealing light on the relationship between CORE's rank and file and the cultural undertones of the civil rights movement.

CORE actively exploited Baldwin's discovery of his political consciousness in the early 1960s.<sup>43</sup> His November 1962 *New Yorker* essay 'Letter from a Region in My Mind' signalled a new period in African American letters. Quite simply, no black author had written such vituperative words in a white magazine.<sup>44</sup> It certainly cemented Baldwin as the pre-eminent African American intellectual of the (fire next) time and thrust Baldwin headlong into the civil rights struggle, not least because its apocalyptic final third warned of a racial nightmare to come. The writer soon became increasingly

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<sup>43</sup> Baldwin became politicised whilst exiled in Paris through witnessing the French treatment of Algerians both home and abroad. His complacency was further rocked by a chance viewing of a newspaper that featured a picture of schoolgirl Dorothy Counts Scoggins being taunted by a white mob as she made her way to integrate a high school in Charlotte, North Carolina. 'It made me furious ...and it made me ashamed,' wrote Baldwin. Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 2001) pp. 87-88; James Baldwin, *No Name In The Street* (New York: Dell, 1972) pp. 25-29, quote p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Polsgrove, *Divided* p. 156. Julian Mayfield gives an appreciation of Baldwin's literary impact in 'And The Came Baldwin' *Freedomways* 3,2 (spring 1963) pp. 143-155.

involved in movement activities and found himself being propelled towards a policy meeting with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.<sup>45</sup>

Baldwin's involvement had benefits for the movement. By the beginning of the 1960s, Baldwin's schedule of appearances and commitments to movement organisations condemned him to a habit of stealing time to write.<sup>46</sup> Friends worried that Baldwin would lose sight of the importance of his writing whilst becoming so involved in America's future. Yet, for the writer, it was more than just a case of a guilty conscience: 'I had to go through the civil rights movement and I don't regret it at all.'<sup>47</sup> Baldwin's commitment to the movement, and the resulting schedule is exemplified by the tour of the west coast that he agreed to conduct on behalf of CORE. CORE's field secretary, Fredricka Teer, felt that such a tour would be 'an excellent opportunity to raise funds as well as acquaint [*sic*] a broader section of... [the] community with a particular point of view shared by many in the field of civil rights.'<sup>48</sup> CORE's national office would pay for Baldwin's transportation and the writer waived his fees in order that all the proceeds go to CORE (although his appearances would undoubtedly boost the sales of *The Fire Next Time*). As CORE was well aware, television and radio were keen to interview Baldwin, as he was then a 'hot item' and a good source of publicity for all concerned.<sup>49</sup> His presence would also attract people to rallies and, hopefully, CORE.

Baldwin toured the west coast at exactly the same time as the SCLC's Birmingham campaign was reaching its peak, meaning that national exposure was

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<sup>45</sup> James Baldwin, 'Down At The Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind' in James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1963) pp. 23-141; Polsgrove, *Divided* pp. 176-185 for details of Baldwin's meeting with Kennedy and the media debate that followed.

<sup>46</sup> James Campbell, *Talking At The Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) p. 143.

<sup>47</sup> Baldwin quoted in W. J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (London: Michael Joseph, 1990) p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> Fredricka Teer, memo to Chapter Chairmen, 23 January 1963. Records of the Congress of Racial Equality, SHSW series 5 box 28 folder 3. Hereafter cited as CORE.

<sup>49</sup> See CORE Regional Office memo to West Coast Chapters, 15 February 1963 CORE series 5 box 28 folder 3.

limited. However, Baldwin certainly used the Birmingham atrocities to illustrate the incendiary predictions that he had made in *The Fire Next Time*, asserting that such trouble could occur in any northern city. 'It's not just possible; it's imminent... It's certainly going to happen unless some changes are made,' he warned.<sup>50</sup> Baldwin viewed the escalating violence as 'a monstrous waste of our national time and energy,' and declared that it was time that America as a nation grew up and emancipated everybody. 'A real dialogue must be established,' he demanded. 'Americans make an effort to hide unpleasant facts.' Asserting that black freedom equalled white freedom, Baldwin tackled his audience and the nation on their own terms: 'it is one thing to do something for the Negroes; it is another to do something for yourself.'<sup>51</sup> Baldwin was similarly aware of his potential role in the struggle, confiding to his interviewer that 'it is interesting – if true – that a writer can be a hero in our time as well as a boxer or a ball player.'<sup>52</sup>

Baldwin's west coast tour illustrates how much time the writer was devoting to his civil rights commitments. Given the demands of this itinerary, it comes as little surprise to discover that Baldwin's writing was deteriorating and that his confidants worried that he was neglecting his creativity in his quest to address his own conscience. From the moment that he arrived on the west coast, he was active on CORE's behalf, giving interviews, press conferences and lectures, and attending dinner receptions, parties and rallies. In eight days, Baldwin had one free afternoon.<sup>53</sup> CORE felt that Baldwin's tour represented a great success. Field Director Gordon Carey felt that the mere fact that CORE had managed to corral Baldwin was a tribute to the success of the

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<sup>50</sup> James Baldwin, comments at San Francisco press conference, 7 May 1963 in 'Baldwin predicts that trouble in B'ham could occur in any Northern city' *San Francisco Chronicle* 8 May 1963 p. 11. Baldwin had been predicting violence in Birmingham since 1961, when he asserted that, 'there will be violence (and of this I am as convinced as I am that I am sitting in this chair) one day in Birmingham. And it won't be the fault of the Negroes.' Campbell, *Talking* p. 145.

<sup>51</sup> Baldwin speech in Denver, 5 May 1963. Quoted in *San Francisco Chronicle* 7 May 1963 p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Baldwin interview with William Hogan, *San Francisco Chronicle* 7 May 1963 p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> 'Baldwin Tour Itinerary' [sic] enclosure from Fredericka Teer (CORE) to Marvin Rich (CORE Community Relations Director) 29 April 1963 CORE series 5 box 28 folder 3.

organisation – the writer’s appearances similarly served to contribute a great deal to the prestige of and awareness about the group and the movement in general.<sup>54</sup>

Despite not appearing at the March on Washington, throughout 1963 Baldwin continued to participate in the movement, bringing his fiery words to press conferences wherever he found himself. He also appeared at SNCC’s Freedom Day in Selma on 7 October, joining one of SNCC’s marches and speaking at a mass meeting. For SNCC, Baldwin’s presence was a deliberate attempt to nationalise their local demonstration. As James Forman recalls, ‘the inclusion of personalities... from the arts, was a tactic we developed from our analysis that... they represented part of the national consciousness.’<sup>55</sup>

Baldwin’s readiness to participate in the movement was convenient for CORE. The organisation was able to take advantage of his celebrity and his intellectual aura to boost its profile, particularly in an area where civil rights activism was not proving to be as successful or as attractive to the media as the organisation would have liked. Baldwin’s west coast tour conveniently coincided with the Birmingham campaign and suggested to the local media that there was such a thing as a civil rights movement outside the South. Riding the crest of the wave created by *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin addressed himself to the vexing issue of direct involvement in the movement from people who were not on the front line. Baldwin also added his intellectual gravitas to CORE, suggesting that involvement with the organisation should not be limited to young activists. Baldwin’s estrangement from the African American church was a

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Western Regional Office Newsletter’ 1 June 1963, p. 1. Records of the Congress of Racial Equality, Western Regional Office, SHSW box 2, folder 13. Hereafter cited as CORE-WRO. Gordon Carey, report of the Program Department nd. 1963, p. 2. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 3. See also ‘SRO for Baldwin Here’ *San Francisco Chronicle* 9 May 1963 p. 15. SRO is shorthand for Standing Room Only.

<sup>55</sup> Forman, *Making* p. 350. Baldwin talked of the hatred that he saw in the faces of the whites he encountered on that day, *ibid.* p. 352. John Lewis also recalls Baldwin being present on Freedom Day. Similarly, Howard Zinn documents Baldwin’s involvement at the same protest. Danny Lyon captures Baldwin in preaching mode at the Freedom Day mass meeting. John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) p. 239; Zinn, *SNCC* pp. 152, 155, 164, 166; Danny Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) p. 100.

further attraction for CORE.<sup>56</sup> In part because of its northern support base, the organisation de-emphasised the utility of religion to the movement. Its non-religious standpoint set CORE apart from much of the southern movement and deprived it of a valuable organisational base. Baldwin's lifestyle naturally distanced him from the SCLC, which might explain why he was not invited to speak at the March on Washington. For CORE, however, his distance from the church and intellectual weight was a valuable sidearm. That CORE was prepared to use such a controversial figure suggests much about the organisation's attitude toward cultural icons and their relevance for the movement. Although the organisation remained a respectful distance from influencing the writer's speeches – Baldwin's general mood at this time ensured that this was not needed anyway – it was fully prepared to accept Baldwin on his terms, thus expanding the cultural element of its campaign.

By 1963 CORE had become aware of the role that the intellectual and artistic community could play in the freedom movement. CORE's hierarchy decided to exploit this by establishing a cultural arm of the organisation. James Farmer wrote to various artists and intellectuals, to point out that CORE 'feel[s] that the cultural and intellectual community can provide a very important service in the civil rights movement generally, and to CORE in particular... [It will be] a serious effort to form the nucleus of a broad, self-sustaining cultural committee in support of CORE.'<sup>57</sup> CORE felt that this committee could perform a number of functions, from highbrow analysis of discrimination in the arts, through ideas for the use of celebrities as fund-raising tools, to developing propaganda for the organisation. That no responses from the contacted artists remain in the CORE papers suggests that the initiative failed due to insufficient interest. CORE's perpetual lack of funds also played a part, as did the reluctance of CORE's central office to become involved in day-to-day operations – the attitude of central office remained

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<sup>56</sup> For Baldwin's ambivalent relationship with organised religion see Baldwin, 'Down' pp. 27-76.

<sup>57</sup> James Farmer letter to Harry Belafonte, Saul Bellow, Sammy Davis Jr., John Dos Passos, James Earl Jones, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, Sidney Poitier, Diana Sands, William Styron, Conrad Browning amongst others, 9 August 1963. CORE series 5 box 20 folder 2.

bound at this time by Farmer's assertion that it should be a fountainhead rather than a bottleneck.<sup>58</sup> However, the fact remains that the CORE cultural committee did not advance further than the planning stage. Whilst CORE's interest in such a committee suggests that the organisation was willing to unite the civil rights movement with high culture, the fact that the committee did not advance beyond the planning stage indicates that the organisation was not fully committed to such a plan. Similarly, the collapse of CORE's Theater Chapter, inducted in late 1963 and disbanded soon after, confirms that CORE had not developed a coherent policy on utilising culture as a political weapon. While the organisation was willing to accept that there was a cultural aspect to the African American freedom struggle, it was unable to comprehend exactly what this aspect was.<sup>59</sup>

On the local level during this period, much of the success of CORE's organising derived from the lack of central control of policy. CORE was firmly of the opinion that individual chapters should be responsible for originating and operating their own campaigns. The National Office concentrated on developing nonviolent strategies for the areas in which local chapters were operating and oversaw CORE's general direction. As August Meier and Elliott Rudwick note, the South relied on staff to provide much of the motivation for CORE work, whereas the dynamism of the North was dependent more on chapter work.<sup>60</sup> Later in the 1960s this policy contributed to CORE's descent into didacticism and the growth of a certain cult of leadership. However, this relaxed attitude afforded local organisers great scope for developing their own campaigns. These campaigns illustrate a number of issues regarding the organisation's use of local culture as an organising tool.

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<sup>58</sup> See James Farmer, 'Staff Report by the National Director' February 1962, p. 5. Alan Gartner papers, SHSW folder 4. Hereafter cited as AGP.

<sup>59</sup> See CORE series 5 box 17 folder 1 for the Theater Chapter of CORE.

<sup>60</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 182.

CORE's local organising in the South was centred on voter registration, which the organisation believed was the core of the segregation issue. As field secretary James McCain reported to the 1958 national convention, 'as Negroes register in the South and participate in politics, those seeking office will not be elected on the segregation issue. This should cause the Negro to develop the determination necessary to break down other barriers of discrimination.'<sup>61</sup> This ingenuous statement became unofficial policy within CORE and had wider repercussions for local organising. CORE's National Action Council felt that McCain's work could become the model for local organising in the South, asserting that, 'the main function of field work in South Carolina, as everywhere else, must be the formation of solid, distinct CORE groups, with an action-project emphasis, a democratic internal set-up, and not restricted to working on registration (although that may be the main emphasis at present).'<sup>62</sup> Although this might suggest that registration was not the sole focus, it is notable that field reports always focused on the numbers of people contacted and the relative success of registering new voters. During the 1960s CORE's operations in the South grew more focused on voter registration. What emphasis fell on the local community was frequently in terms of its militancy, how independent it was from the local white power structure, its probable support for a direct action campaign and how afraid the people might be of reprisals.<sup>63</sup> CORE did not address a central issue surrounding extending the vote, namely that of using the vote wisely, which explains the naïveté of McCain's statement. SNCC's policy, much like that of Highlander, stressed education and encouraged the voter to make an informed, independent choice in the voting booth. CORE, however, felt that the benefits of registration were self-evident – the political culture of the United States would be transformed simply because black adults had the right to vote. This, naturally,

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<sup>61</sup> James T. McCain, 'Report to the 1958 CORE Convention' CORE series 4 box 1 folder 2.

<sup>62</sup> CORE National Action Committee minutes, 18 July 1958 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 7.

<sup>63</sup> See for example, 'Field Report: Oachita Parish' December 1963, CORE Monroe Chapter papers, SHSW box 3 folder 2.



provided little bulwark against corruption and the perpetuation of paternalism in southern communities.

This direction can be related to the confidence in and stability of CORE's philosophy among its members. As CORE's constitution stated, CORE was 'working to abolish discrimination based on skin color, race, religion or national origin, and stressing direct nonviolent action.'<sup>64</sup> All staff members and affiliates generally agreed upon this philosophy. CORE, it seems, had little of the intellectual debates that characterised SNCC's internal operations at this point. The beauty (and ultimately the limitation) of this philosophy was that it was so inclusive. Yet CORE members only came to challenge it after 1965, and that was on the simple grounds that they no longer believed in nonviolence. SNCC, however, was constantly involved in – and in many ways paralysed by – arguments surrounding its members' conception of nonviolence. SNCC members debated whether nonviolence was based on Christian concepts of brotherly love or more existential beliefs in individual rights, or whether it was simply incompatible with the experiences of local people in the Black Belt. For CORE members, this was a simple equation: the organisation was run on the basis that its members would adhere to nonviolent philosophy. Thus local groups, provided they believed in nonviolence, could determine their own programmes and follow their own instincts about the correct basis for nonviolence. CORE did not have to contend with the mystical existentialism that pervaded SNCC in the wake of Bob Moses. In the North, most of its black members were working class. Leadership positions in the early 1960s tended to be filled by middle-class (and often middle-aged) whites who were less fascinated with philosophy. In the South, CORE members were encouraged to act, rather than think, as suggested in the NAC's urging of 'action-project emphasis' among CORE groups.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> 'Amended Constitution of the Congress of Racial Equality' 2 July 1958. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 2. This document – and in particular, this clause – remained unchanged until the organisation's adoption of Black Power and concurrent abandonment of nonviolence in 1966.

<sup>65</sup> CORE National Action Committee minutes, 18 July 1958 p. 1.

The 1962 National Council decided that CORE's policy 'should be one of a continuing voter registration campaign,' operating on a national level, 'with specific emphasis on the Deep South... [Staff] should exploit present interest in other phases to gain support in voter registration... National CORE should prepare booklets, pamphlets and other educational material to serve as guides in organizing and sustaining voter registration campaigns.'<sup>66</sup> Educational materials were used only to aid CORE workers in ensuring the success of their campaigns. CORE did not envisage using educational materials to assist local people in learning how to use their vote. This failure to engage with local people at their own level can be extended to CORE's attitude towards local culture as an organising tool. In direct contrast to SNCC, no CORE documents suggest that folk culture be used in such a manner. Although CORE was adamant that its chapters must be community-based and responsive to their particular area, there remains some scepticism about the ability of a chapter to function without field secretaries. A 1963 CORE staff meeting noted that:

field secretaries must seek out new people, discuss CORE, its philosophy and techniques with them... An important part of the field secretary's job is to find people with positive attitudes, people who have healthy and intelligent understanding of the conditions and who are not getting involved because they have private wars of their own or grudges against other organizations. We have no longer the problem of selling CORE; CORE has been sold through the Sit-ins and the Freedom-Rides.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than talking to people and learning what they wanted for themselves and their locality, CORE organisers were encouraged to promote CORE actively and seek out people who were already responsive to organisational involvement by building on the awareness of CORE that had been generated earlier. In promoting itself, CORE inadvertently reinforced aspects of southern paternalism that it was hoping to destroy. In failing to engage with local people on their own terms, CORE implicitly rejected the culture of the South. Furthermore, in acknowledging that the work of James Baldwin,

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<sup>66</sup> 'Minutes of the 1962 National Council meeting' 10-11 February 1962 p. 12. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 7.

<sup>67</sup> 'Minutes of CORE Staff Meeting, McIntosh, Georgia' 9-10 March 1963 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1.

for example, was a useful organisational tool, it was suggesting that high culture – namely, literature – was more valid than the culture of the ill-educated black South. Between 1960 and 1964, CORE regarded education simply as a means to promote the organisation. Education was envisaged as a community relations tool to educate participants, the general public and segregationists about CORE's aims and programmes.<sup>68</sup>

However, the autonomy given to local chapters did allow individual CORE staff members to follow their own instincts. Most notably, Dave Dennis did much to broaden the parameters of CORE's southern activities. Dennis had risen through the ranks of CORE since he joined as a teenager in 1960. Initially a member of New Orleans CORE who joined because a particularly attractive young woman was also a member, Dennis overcame his libidinous tendencies to become a highly effective organiser in Louisiana and Mississippi. Dennis moved to Mississippi in June 1962 and, as the only CORE worker in the state, worked heavily with his counterparts in SNCC.<sup>69</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, to see that he proposed the establishment of a community training centre in Canton, Mississippi. In this centre, 'services might be offered to help counteract [the] economic and cultural deprivation' that prevailed in the area.<sup>70</sup> Dennis arranged for a library to be established as part of this project and envisaged counselling and social facilities, in addition to educational provisions for the centre. Dennis had seen the success of similar projects developed by SNCC and felt that CORE – and the local people that it served – could benefit from similar work. Dennis also became influenced by SNCC's concept of parallel structures, expressing his admiration for the Freedom Vote campaign, and suggesting that organisational rivalry had been defeated in

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<sup>68</sup> See 'Community Relations Report' CORE Council Meeting 11-12 February 1961. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 5.

<sup>69</sup> All biographical details about Dave Dennis from Dave Dennis interview with Tom Dent, Mississippi Oral Histories, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University cassette numbers 46, 47.

<sup>70</sup> 'Minutes of the Steering Committee of the National Action Council' 7 December 1963 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1.

the area during 1963.<sup>71</sup> CORE remained a vibrant organisation in Mississippi whilst Dennis was co-ordinating operations in the state. Such was Dennis' success, he was appointed CORE's Director of Southern Operations soon after the 1964 Summer Project, a position he held only until 1965, when he chose to return to university. Significantly, Dennis worked closely with SNCC in Mississippi. SNCC's style undoubtedly influenced his work with CORE and does much to explain why his example is unique within the organisation.

CORE's northern programme was based more on employment and housing, reflecting the concerns of the organisation's northern membership and the relative power of the individual chapters. Voter registration was much less of an issue when inner city residents were faced with rent gouging, slumlords and economic deprivation. CORE's task, believed the Program Department, was to utilise protest centred on these issues in order to establish itself in the ghetto.<sup>72</sup> Since voter registration was less of an issue in the North, CORE needed a different programmatic focus. CORE was, of course, aware of this, but emphasised that both organising techniques needed the same foundations: a base in the community and leadership within that community. One of the major problems with this approach was the over-reliance on the vision and determination of local chapters. Frequently, field staff from national CORE felt that individual chapters lacked both direction and the ability to implement programmes. A prime example of this issue was the experience of the Bay Area CORE chapters during 1962 and 1963, which needed patient work from CORE field staff to overcome communication, policy and leadership inadequacies, not to mention a lack of rapport with the local community.<sup>73</sup> Two rival factions within Berkeley CORE had to be

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<sup>71</sup> Dave Dennis, 'An Abortion for a Pregnant State' report to CORE National Action Council. c.1963. pp. 1-2. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 5. For more evidence of Dennis' success, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) pp. 185-187; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* pp. 166-167, 169, 178-180.

<sup>72</sup> 'Program Department Report to National Action Council' 8,9,10 November 1963, p. 1. AGP folder 11.

<sup>73</sup> See CORE national office (no author noted) to Emily Mikkelson, 29 October 1959; Genevieve Hughes, 'Field Report: San Francisco, California' December 1961 CORE series 5 box 8 folder 7. Fredricka Teer, 'West Coast Regional Field Report' 11 January 1963; Val Coleman, memo re: 'Trip to California,' 31 December 1963 CORE series 5 box 50 folder 5.

separated into two chapters: one to focus their energies on Berkeley and the other to be based in Oakland.<sup>74</sup>

Thanks to some patient work by national staff and the rise of effective leaders in the area such as Bill Bradley in San Francisco, activities in the Bay Area began to improve. Berkeley CORE undertook an interesting diversion in 1963.<sup>75</sup> Due most likely to the presence of at least one professional historian in the chapter, Charles G. Sellers, Berkeley CORE decided to pursue a campaign surrounding the issue of the representation of minority groups in American history textbooks. Berkeley CORE, supported by its counterpart in San Francisco, felt that textbooks then being used in Californian schools did not present a fair portrayal of the contributions of minority groups to the history and culture of the state. 'Consequently,' it concluded, 'minority group members come to feel that they have no history, no culture, no part in society.'<sup>76</sup> San Francisco CORE proposed that the State Board of Education and the State Curriculum Commission inform publishers of their duties to offer a fair and just portrayal of minority groups in their history books. The chapter urged them to 'do everything within their constitutional powers to initiate, direct and adopt measures for the speedy and effective achievement' of these duties.<sup>77</sup> Berkeley CORE followed this up by utilising the skills of a number of UC-Berkeley historians to review the content of

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<sup>74</sup> See Genevieve Hughes, 'Field Reports, Oakland, California,' 22-30 December 1961, 18 June 1962. CORE series 5 box 8 folder 7. Meier and Rudwick ignore the factional rivalry, based largely on class boundaries between (middle-class, generally white) Berkeley and (working-class and largely black) Oakland. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* pp. 193, 198, 199.

<sup>75</sup> Berkeley CORE's African American Chairman, Arnold Williams, had a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of nonviolent direct action. During a picket in April 1961, Williams was taunted by a white sailor. Having had enough of these racist taunts, Williams, a Berkeley native, offered the sailor to a fight, whereupon the two retired to a nearby pool hall to continue their "discussion." Gordon Carey was informed of this, prompting him to comment that Williams' victory could be interpreted as 'nonviolence with a vengeance!!'. Although some members of Berkeley CORE believed that Williams should have been expelled, he remained in the group. Carey's reasoning on the conclusion of this issue is also illuminating: 'possibly it should be emphasised again here that CORE is not and never has been a pacifist organization. We simply use non-violence as a technique.' First quote, Gordon Carey letter to Thomas Roland [Berkeley CORE] 4 April 1961; second quote, Carey to Anthony Salotto [Berkeley CORE] 20 April 1961. Both CORE series 5 box 7 folder 7.

<sup>76</sup> San Francisco CORE, 'Submission to State Curriculum Conference' n.d. p. 1. CORE-WRO box 4 folder 7.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p. 3.

the most popular textbooks in state schools. The historians, including Winthrop Jordan, Lawrence Levine, Sellers and Kenneth Stamp, reviewed a number of books taught at elementary and high school level, and concluded that Californian education was in 'an unhealthy condition.'<sup>78</sup> As historians they asserted that textbook publishers had been too keen to defer to the Southern interpretation of the nineteenth century, so much so that the texts reflected views that had been 'rejected or drastically modified' by the prevailing historiographical consensus. As private citizens, the historians expressed their concerns that such 'historical distortions help perpetuate and intensify the pattern of racial discrimination.'<sup>79</sup> Citing Ralph Ellison, the historians argued that Negroes needed to be 'seen' in textbooks, lest whites forget that they contributed to American history. The historians even found time to give the State Commission a brief history lesson although, curiously, Sellers and his colleagues failed to note the crucial role that Chinese and Mexican immigrants had made to the coastal region.<sup>80</sup>

CORE's experience in the Bay Area and Dave Dennis's example illuminate how CORE's decentralised operation left local initiatives to local organisers. Berkeley CORE extended its protest into the educational sphere to reveal how California excluded its immigrant population from the story of the state. Dennis adopted a number of SNCC initiatives, including the community centres and pushed CORE towards an understanding of the need to broaden the remit of the civil rights movement. Ultimately, though, CORE's programme at this time was designed only to address the issue of black political strength. According to this theory, once the vote was attained in enough numbers, African Americans would be able to play a full and beneficial role in civic and

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<sup>78</sup> Kenneth M. Stamp, Winthrop D. Jordan, Lawrence W. Levine, Robert L. Middlekauff, Charles G. Sellers, George Stocking Jr., 'The Negro in American History Textbooks' n.d. p. 1. CORE-WRO box 4 folder 7. Meier and Rudwick note that Levine, in particular, became 'heavily involved' in CORE activism in the Bay area, but decline to mention Sellers' involvement. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession 1915-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) p. 194.

<sup>79</sup> Stamp *et al*, 'The Negro' p. 1. Meier and Rudwick, *Black History* pp. 110, 239-253 for the historiography of slavery between 1900 and the 1960s. For the southern interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction era and the challenge to this consensus, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 72-80, 354-360.

<sup>80</sup> Stamp *et al*, 'The Negro' pp. 2-5.

political life. It is not, therefore, surprising to ascertain that culture played only a minor role in CORE's activities before 1964. However, there are some crucial issues to note surrounding chapter autonomy during this period. First, CORE had a large constituency in northern urban areas, much more so than other civil rights organisations, and was already beginning to address ghetto issues in such areas.<sup>81</sup> These areas were the incubators for Black Power and cultural nationalism – indeed, Roy Innis, later to lead CORE into black cultural nationalism, was beginning to develop the organisation in Harlem. Similar, albeit less militant, chapters were emerging in urban areas such as Detroit and Chicago. These younger, more militant CORE members were starting to appreciate that the difference between white and black was not solely in terms of colour. Since individual chapters were granted freedom to develop their own programmes, they were able to respond to the changing attitudes of their members. Certain urban chapters of CORE experienced racial tension between chapter members, leading to the problems experienced in San Francisco and Detroit.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the militancy of certain CORE chapters, such as Harlem CORE, attracted younger militants, leading to an increase in CORE's militancy. With the lack of a large-scale national campaign, national CORE was unable (nor was it inclined) to offer strong guidance on the development of programmes. The work conducted by Dave Dennis in Mississippi brought him into close contact with SNCC workers who were becoming more conscious of the value of local culture to their organising. It was not long before CORE was addressing the issue of black psychological and cultural strength in its ongoing effort to remain in the vanguard of the African American freedom struggle. Finally, national CORE was not particularly concerned with the minutiae of local chapter politics. As long as chapters retained an active multiracial membership who were nonviolent and contributed their

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<sup>81</sup> Philadelphia CORE based a programme in the slums on the housing and landlord extortion issues, much as SNCC was later to do in, for example, Atlanta.

<sup>82</sup> See CORE series 5 box 14 folder 6; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* p. 205-206 for information on racial tensions in Detroit CORE in 1961; CORE series 5 box 51 folder 6; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* p. 207 for information on racial tensions in San Francisco CORE during 1962. There were also factional tensions between rival CORE chapters in Chicago that developed in 1965. See, for example, Faith Rich papers, SHSW; Robert Curvin papers, SHSW.

affiliation fees, national CORE was happy. This latter point leads to a problem within CORE's internal structure: allowing local chapters such autonomy could lead to a loss of enthusiasm within less successful chapters.<sup>83</sup> Because of CORE's national outlook and broad base of support, it was logistically and financially impossible to gather all its staff members for retreats and workshops such as those established by SNCC and those promoted by Highlander. Ultimately, CORE's strength resided in its local chapters. Although CORE did not engage fully with black culture during this period, these factors give clear indication of CORE's future development. They establish that the organisation was a fertile breeding ground for the emergence of cultural nationalism.

This environment relates to CORE's reliance on large programmes to bring in money and exposure. Small-scale operations, such as those proposed by Dave Dennis, needed time and money to ensure their success and were not media-friendly. Throughout the 1960s CORE searched hard for a programme that would match the success of, and live up to the expectations generated by, the Freedom Rides. It cannot be doubted that grappling with this issue led to a drain on the intellectual resources of CORE. CORE was also almost paranoid in its insistence that it was of the same stature as the NAACP and the Urban League. Tension existed between the major civil rights organisations over their relative media exposure. Two conclusions can be drawn from these issues: CORE would not get involved in anything that was too radical and it needed to develop the same financial stability as the other organisations. Neither of these considerations can be said to be consistent with the kind of local organising that emphasised folk culture, nor do they indicate that a cultural emphasis would be a viable policy to follow. The relationship between the local community, media and the organisation was best outlined by James Farmer in his 1962 Staff Report, when he asserted that, 'the basis for the CORE community relations program is of course the action program of national and local CORE. No mass media is interested in our

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<sup>83</sup> See Gordon R. Carey, Field Director, 'Report to the 1960 Conference-Convention' p. 1. Meier-Rudwick Collection of CORE Papers, SHSW box 2 folder 3.



philosophy apart from the way in which we put the philosophy into practice.’<sup>84</sup> Thus CORE’s philosophy was only worth detailing if it brought in the mass media. This then logically leads to the conclusion that CORE had little time (or money) for spreading a philosophy to the local people. Success, therefore, was interpreted in terms of CORE’s ability to bring in the media, rather than freeing the minds of local people.

## **Conclusion**

The years 1960 to 1963 were characterised by the civil rights organisations coming to the realisation that culture was a viable means through which African Americans could be organised. The SCLC was already of the opinion that the church was the most effective organising tool in the South. This devotion to the church dominated the SCLC’s interpretation of the civil rights movement and had repercussions for its relationship with African American culture. During this period, the SCLC could not conceive of a valid black secular culture. Its desire to project an image of African American respectability and its focus on urban protest movements also militated against it engaging directly with a culture that had been born out of a shortage of educational opportunities in the rural South. Its use of culture must be viewed within this wider context. Its mass demonstrations and urban campaigns made great demands on its staff, few of whom were interested in the more esoteric realms of cultural struggle. They were more interested in pressuring local and federal government through direct action. However, through the CEP, the SCLC gave tacit approval to a project that was helping to transmit and preserve African American folk culture whilst developing the political culture of the South. The SCLC was primarily concerned with the latter effect of the CEP but it was fully aware of the vital role that Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson’s curriculum played in ensuring the maximum involvement of the black community.

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<sup>84</sup> James Farmer, ‘Staff Report by the National Director’ February 1962, p. 4. AGP folder 4.

For both the SCLC and SNCC, the Albany campaign was a learning process. However, where the SCLC interpreted its mistakes purely within an organisational framework, SNCC learned of the cultural dimension of the freedom struggle and began to apply this lesson elsewhere. The Freedom Singers were the most obvious manifestation of this interest in using culture as a political weapon. SNCC was less concerned with short-term mobilisation of local people than the SCLC, an attitude that is reflected in its application of African American culture in this period. When making a long-term commitment to a community, SNCC acknowledged that it had to generate a similar commitment among local people. Between 1960 and 1963, it began to realise that culture could be a means through which this could be effected, particularly through the operation of freedom schools and community centres. SNCC's local organising pushed it towards an acceptance of the vital role that local culture played in the continued viability of Black Belt communities. It, too, was experiencing the benefits of using folk culture as an educational tool in the development of southern political culture using techniques pioneered by Highlander's staff.

On the other hand, CORE's programmatic thrust was characterised by the lack of a cultural focus. Although James Baldwin gave the organisation useful cultural kudos, CORE did not create a cultural arm to further this experiment. CORE's central organisation was concerned primarily with searching for a suitable sequel to the Freedom Rides. Thus the relative lack of interest in using culture must be appreciated relative to central CORE's aims – namely its competition for media attention and funds with SNCC and the SCLC. However, the autonomy of its individual chapters gave them room to develop their own initiatives that often included a cultural focus. Dave Dennis and the Berkeley historians were the most visible of these initiatives and indicate that, just as with SNCC, individual initiative did much to define the more experimental approaches within the organisation. Furthermore, CORE's activities in the ghettos gave further indication of the sensibilities of many urban blacks, which was to become increasingly important to the organisation's policy.

As a composite, these studies indicate that, underneath the narrative of the sit-ins, Freedom Rides and large-scale campaigns, aspects of the civil rights movement were coming to the conclusion that secular African American culture could be a useful weapon. Although the SCLC shied away from such a policy, SNCC and – to a lesser extent – CORE discovered that the local culture of the South was an important unifying force, both within the community and between local people and civil rights activists. SNCC’s activities in south-west Georgia and Dave Dennis’s work for CORE are thus suggestive indicators of the movement’s future direction.

### 3.

## **Uniting Around Black Culture: Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Robert F. Williams and black nationalism, 1960-1963**

Whilst civil rights studies generally focus on the southern movement between 1960 and 1963, there tends to be less investigation of the concurrent resurgence of black nationalist sentiment in the North. Given that black culture was used most explicitly as a political weapon by the black nationalists who came to prominence after the death of Malcolm X it is important to establish the 1960s roots of black nationalism. A study of three central Black Power figures – Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka and Robert F. Williams – illuminates how black nationalism developed in the early 1960s. Malcolm X and Baraka emerged from the black urban experience of the 1950s and 1960s. While Malcolm X's speeches became founding documents for Black Power, Baraka's writing both commented on and reflected the resurgence of black nationalism. Whereas Malcolm X suggests that black nationalism emerged as a critique of the movement before becoming drawn into in the movement, Williams' example suggests that important strands of black nationalist thought also emerged within the movement before beginning to criticise the movement's shortcomings. Baraka stands somewhere between the two. Although he remained aloof from the southern movement, he actively supported Williams' struggle in North Carolina. His work therefore suggests that elements of black nationalist thought emerged both as a critique of the movement and from within the movement itself. Crucially, all three figures establish how black nationalists saw African American culture as a tool of the freedom struggle.

In many respects their work provides the foundations for the emergence of Black Power in the late 1960s. No true Black Power advocate rejected Malcolm X's influence and without him, Black Power would have been an entirely different phenomenon. A number of late 1960s black nationalists, most notably the Black Panther Party, took great influence from Williams. Whilst Baraka's influence on Black Power is less immediately apparent, his involvement in the movement provides for a perfect example of how African American artists involved themselves directly in the Black Power movement. His experiments in theatre were of great importance to the Black Arts Movement that exploded in the late 1960s.

Black nationalist sentiment fully conceived of black culture as a political weapon in the late 1960s. However, the immediate roots of this movement have so far received little attention. An examination of these three leading black nationalist figures proves that Black Power had been percolating for some time before exploding into American life and that the cultural impulse was already gathering momentum during the early 1960s. Malcolm X is, of course, the archetypal black nationalist hero. Historians, though, focus overwhelmingly on the final eighteen months of his life, rarely examining his rhetoric prior to his split from the Nation of Islam.<sup>1</sup> Whilst his 1964 assertion that

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<sup>1</sup> This process follows George Breitman's lead. His two collections of Malcolm X's speeches only contain one speech from the Nation of Islam period, given only days before Kennedy's assassination and, according to Breitman, atypical. Breitman's biographical study similarly concentrates on 1964 and 1965. Goldman's biography examines Malcolm X's entire life before his expulsion in under 100 pages and devotes over 150 to his post-Nation life. Branch mentions Malcolm X only three times in the first volume of his history of the civil rights movement whereas he is a significant figure, after his split from the Nation of Islam, in volume two. Bruce Perry devotes near equal space to the Nation of Islam years and the last year. Robert Weisbrot makes an effort to appreciate Malcolm X's Nation of Islam years. James H. Cone takes the Nation of Islam period seriously, mainly due to the religious focus of his work. Clayborne Carson urges historians to examine Malcolm X within the wider context of African American protest during the 1950s and 1960s. George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) pp. 4-17, citation p. 3; George Breitman (ed.), *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970); George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York: Merit, 1967) pp. 22-95; Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) pp. 26-120, 123-278; Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) pp. 320, 874-875, 916; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) *passim*; Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown NY: Station Hill Press, 1991) pp. 138-244, 245-367; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1990) pp. 170-178; James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (London: Fount, 1991); Clayborne Carson, 'Malcolm and the American State' in David Gallen (ed.), *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1991) pp. 17-53, esp. 18, 49. See also William L. Van Deburg,

black culture could play a central role in the liberation struggle is important, it is rarely contextualised by historians who assert that culture was important to Malcolm X.<sup>2</sup> This is due to two factors: the late 1960s black radical focus on Malcolm X's philosophy during the last year of his life and the disinclination of many white historians to come to terms with Malcolm X's Black Muslim period. There is a suggestion that, prior to his expulsion from the Black Muslims, Malcolm X was simply the mouthpiece of Elijah Muhammad. His voice, according to this view, only emerged once he discovered that Muhammad was not quite as chaste as he should have been. However, an examination of Malcolm X's rhetoric in this period offers hints as to the development of his thought as he approached his split from the Black Muslims. It suggests that his emerging attitude towards using culture as an organising tool had its roots in his Muslim faith.

Amiri Baraka's importance grew as the decade progressed.<sup>3</sup> Between 1960 and 1963 he was not approached to involve himself in the movement. His associations with the Communist Party and the Cuban Revolution frightened CORE and the SCLC; his lack of fame contributed to their lack of interest in him and his atheism and general nonconformity also alienated the SCLC. Neither did SNCC make contact with Baraka at this time, most likely due to the fact that he was still a minor figure in New York literary circles. Prior to 1964, Baraka's political concentration was focused on Cuba and Robert F. Williams' struggle in North Carolina. However, Baraka's experience of this period laid the foundations for his later attempts to unite African American culture with the black freedom struggle and deserves attention. His ambivalent relationship with the movement – he was, at once, attracted to and repelled by it – is demonstrated through

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*New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 1-9; Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth & Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) examines the meaning of Malcolm X in the 1990s and includes a mild critique of some of the above works.

<sup>2</sup> Breitman (ed.), *By Any Means* pp. 53-56; Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> One of the more amusing results of Baraka changing his name from LeRoi Jones in 1965 (in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, although he did not publish under this name until 1967) has been the confusion surrounding his name which writers and historians display, further compounded by Baraka's playful titling of his autobiography: Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, revised edition 1997). This study will simply refer to Baraka by his chosen name. Works completed before his name change will have the footnote citation LeRoi Jones.

his career between 1960 and 1963. Baraka came to the movement via a circuitous route that involved Cuba, jazz music and literary criticism. As such, his concern was altogether less southern than the mainstream movement and focused more vigorously on black unity.

The civil rights movement also transformed Robert F. Williams, although rather than changing him from an artist into an activist, it subtly modified the means through which he protested. The NAACP convinced Williams of the value of propaganda and his experience of black music suggested to him that the two could be combined to powerful effect. Thus Williams developed a radio programme that educated and challenged its listeners through a startling mix of incendiary oratory and thought-provoking music. Although he remained resolutely independent during the 1960s, Williams exerted great influence over the generation that was to bring Black Power to the forefront of the civil rights movement later in the decade. He resisted organisational affiliation wherever possible, in order to allow himself the greatest room for manoeuvre. Many activists focused on his 1962 text, *Negroes With Guns*, as a handbook for independent black organising and as proof of the efficacy of armed self-defence. Moreover, his radio programme and his radical pamphlet *The Crusader* brought Williams' conception of the struggle (and culture's role within it) to thousands of southern activists during the early and mid 1960s.

## **Malcolm X**

For Malcolm X, being cultured was a prerequisite for being a free man. His autobiography, in a chapter entitled 'Saved,' emphasises that learning to read – specifically learning to read about history – was fundamental to his redemption. He claimed that, during his prison spell between 1946 and 1952, 'you couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge.' Part of the appeal of Elijah Muhammad's teaching for Malcolm X was in its sense of history. He argued that 'you can hardly show me a black adult in America – or a white one, for that matter – who knows from the history books

anything like the truth about the black man's role.'<sup>4</sup> For Malcolm X, history had been 'whitened,' and so, whilst still in prison, he sought books that offered a view of black history. These included *The Souls of Black Folk*, Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History*, books on Nat Turner, John Brown, Lenin, Marx, Stalin, Hitler and Haile Selassie; although his fiction reading was limited to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His reading of history opened his eyes, 'gradually then wider and wider, to how the whole world's white men had indeed acted like devils, pillaging and raping and bleeding and draining the whole world's non-white people.'<sup>5</sup> The impact of Malcolm X's reading of slavery becomes apparent in his interpretation of the relationship between house and field slaves that was a frequent theme within his published speeches. For him, an awareness of the unique black contribution to history was fundamental to knowledge of oneself and of one's racial identity. This was a powerful recruiting technique for the Nation of Islam in American jails.

To be a black man, said Malcolm X, 'you have to have a knowledge of history no matter what you are going to do; anything that you undertake you have to have a knowledge of history in order to be successful in it.'<sup>6</sup> In order to be free, Malcolm X asserted, a cultural awakening to history was needed, and 'when you and I wake up... and learn the history of our kind, and the history of the white kind, then... we'll be at an advantage. The only thing that puts you and me at a disadvantage is our lack of knowledge concerning history.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, one of the primary tasks of the Black Muslims was to teach not only religion, but also history – the two being inextricably linked. As Malcolm X noted, 'you have to know history to know something about God's religion.'<sup>8</sup> 'And when you see that you've got problems,' he pointed out, 'all you

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<sup>4</sup> Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1965) pp. 267 (first quote), 269 (second quote).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 271; for Malcolm X's reading lists, *ibid.* pp. 270-271; Perry, *Malcolm* pp. 118, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm X, untitled speech, December 1962 (no specific date given) accessed at: <http://www.malcolm-x.org/organisation/speeches/blackhistory.htm> (25/3/02).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*



have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours. Once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight.’<sup>9</sup>

Malcolm X normally used the Muslim interpretation of history in order to win over sceptics. However, in the midst of the Civil War Centennial, he invoked American history to give credence to the Muslim message. In October, at around the same time that Berkeley’s CORE chapter was criticising the portrayal of American history in school textbooks, he described the contemporary race situation as the ‘worst domestic crisis since the Civil War.’<sup>10</sup> American schools were still trumpeting the white interpretation of the country’s history, which emphasised the democratic values behind the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, despite the reality that undermined this assertion. Malcolm X used this distortion to his advantage, claiming that the American Revolution had been fought to claim the country for the white man. The Civil War was fought between ‘two thieves’ to ensure that the country was kept intact for the white man.<sup>11</sup> Malcolm X concluded, ‘today he [the white man] will now fight a race war to keep from having to share this country on an equal basis with anyone else but himself.’<sup>12</sup>

Even during Malcolm X’s Black Muslim period, his concern with the value of culture to the black struggle can be discerned. One of his most significant speeches from the period refers directly to the mental prison that white America had imposed on its slaves and their ancestors. An awareness of culture and history would undoubtedly help free black people from this prison. As Malcolm X proclaimed, Uncle Toms still existed in the twentieth century. The Uncle Tom,

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<sup>9</sup> Malcolm X, ‘Message to the Grass Roots’ speech, Detroit, 10 November 1963 in Breitman (ed.), *Speaks* p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm X, ‘America’s gravest crisis since the Civil War’ speech at the University of California-Berkeley, 11 October 1963 in Bruce Perry (ed.), *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989) p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm X quoted in ‘Alex Haley interviews Malcolm X’ *Playboy* May 1963 accessed at: <http://members.dencity.com/ccblack/shabazz/playboy.html> (25/3/02).

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm X, ‘America’s gravest’ p. 63.

wants to be something other than what he is. And knowing that America is a white country, he knows he can't be Black and be an American too. So he never calls himself Black. He calls himself an American Negro – a Negro in America. And usually he'll deny his own race, his own color, just to be a second-class American. He'll deny his own history, his own culture. He'll deny all of his brothers and sisters in Africa, in Asia, in the East, just to be a second-class American. He denies everything that he represents or everything that was in his past, just to be accepted into a country and into a government that has rejected him ever since he was brought here.<sup>13</sup>

This Uncle Tom 'doesn't realize the advancement and the high state of his own culture that he was living in before he was kidnapped and brought to this country by the white man.'<sup>14</sup> To put it simply, the Uncle Tom does not know history, and this gap in his knowledge has led directly to his downfall, continued subservience and enslavement to double consciousness. For Malcolm X and the Muslims, black history and religion were the means through which the individual – always a male in the Nation's gendered society – could free himself from this double consciousness. According to the Nation of Islam, a new self-image would be followed by a more physical form of freedom through following Black Muslim doctrine. Real black Americans were rejecting Christianity in favour of Islam and rejecting American culture along the way. The Muslims, for Malcolm X,

don't think as Americans any more, but as a Black man [*sic*]. With the mind of a Black man, we look beyond America. And we look beyond the interests of the white man. The thinking of this new type of Negro is broad. It's more international. This integrationist always thinks in terms of an American. But you find the masses of Black people today think in terms of Black. And this Black thinking enables them to see beyond the confines of America.<sup>15</sup>

For Malcolm X and the Muslims, looking beyond America involved turning eastwards to Africa. Africa was both the cradle of civilisation and the natural home, both physically and spiritually, of black people. Furthermore, thanks to his roots and

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm X, 'Twenty million Black people in a political, economic, and mental prison' speech, Michigan State University, 23 January 1963 in Perry (ed.) *Last Speeches* p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p. 45.

culture, the black African man was able to demand and receive respect from whites. According to Malcolm X, when he checked into hotels under his Muslim name Malik Shabazz, he received a completely different reaction from white staff members. 'I come to the desk,' he said, 'and always see that "here-comes-a-Negro" look... But when I say "Malik Shabazz," their whole attitude changes: they snap to respect. They think I'm an African... The African gets respect *because he has an identity and cultural roots.*'<sup>16</sup>

These few speeches and interviews illustrate the importance of history and culture to the Black Muslims and to Malcolm X during his membership of the organisation. Whilst there was no explicit use of popular and folk culture as a political weapon by the organisation – or by Malcolm X – at this time, both emphasised the value of being educated and cultured to African Americans. Those without knowledge of black culture and history were doomed to Tomism, and those who denied the validity of black history were simply doing the white man's bidding. As Malcolm X attested, 'it's from Mr. Muhammad that the black masses are learning for the first time in 400 years the real truth of how the white man brainwashed the black man, kept him ignorant of his true history, robbed him of his self-confidence.'<sup>17</sup>

Further investigation complicates the relationship between Malcolm X and culture. Robin Kelley deliberately places Malcolm X within black culture, suggesting that he was always in tune with the culture of the black masses, especially during his World War Two zoot suit and conk days. His years in Boston alerted him to the existence of a hipster (and, in Kelley's interpretation, an oppositional) culture that he wholeheartedly embraced.<sup>18</sup> His love of the lindy hop and other black dances were, for the Muslim Malcolm X, prime examples of the bourgeois decadence of white society. They perfectly coincide with the Muslim rejection of degenerate and licentious

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<sup>16</sup> 'Alex Haley interviews.' Emphasis added. It is worth noting that this event and its recollection predate Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca and his conversion to Orthodox Islam in 1964, when he was re-named El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm X quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994) pp. 162-163, 165.

American culture. Malcolm Little certainly involved himself in the turpitude of Harlem's street culture, ingratiating himself with the local pimps and being taught the sins of the flesh by local prostitutes. He also learned of the immorality of white men (and their lack of sexual prowess).<sup>19</sup> "Detroit Red" in Malcolm's narrative is a lost soul devoid of an identity, numbed to the beauty and complexity of lived experience, unable to see beyond the dominant culture he mimics,' according to Kelley.<sup>20</sup> That Red took drugs and drank was further confirmation of the righteousness of the Muslim way. As Kelley puts it, 'holding to the view that one should work to live rather than live to work, Malcolm decided to turn the pursuit of leisure and pleasure into a career.'<sup>21</sup> This pointless goal ultimately led Malcolm Little to jail. Only Islam saved him, making the link between the pursuit of leisure, crime and jail easy to discern.

Having experienced only the base elements of black and white culture during his youth, it comes as no surprise that the mature Malcolm X expressed such disgust with the culture of America and focused instead on Africa as the root of civilised culture. Through this, Malcolm X's rejection of white society and the potential for interracial dialogue comes into sharp relief. His attempt to live within white society was inevitably doomed. To be black in a white world and to accept interracial influence was, for Malcolm X, impossible. At the Savoy Ballroom in early 1940s Harlem, he had witnessed the desperation of whites to experience black culture at first hand in the belief that it was somehow more carefree. They 'were just mad for Negro "atmosphere," especially [in] some of the places which had what you might call Negro *soul*,' he later sneered.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, this growing influence of whites led to the dilution of black culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* pp. 174-180.

<sup>20</sup> Kelley, *Race* p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* p. 181. Emphasis in original.

As Cornel West notes, ‘Malcolm X feared the culturally hybrid character of black life.’<sup>23</sup> For West, Malcolm X held a Manichean interpretation of culture – it was either black or white, but could not represent a mixture of the two. Should culture be such a hybrid, it could never fully explicate the horror of white supremacy and its effects on blacks. Neither could this hybrid culture come to terms with the political issue of black freedom – since it defined the destinies of both black and white as inseparably linked, this goal was simply farfetched. According to West, this dichotomous interpretation of culture led directly to Malcolm X’s inability to comprehend the power and potential of black music and, specifically, jazz.<sup>24</sup> This also illustrates further complexities in Malcolm’s dismissal of the freedom songs: ‘whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms... singing “We Shall Overcome”? You don’t do that in a revolution. You don’t do any singing, you’re too busy swinging.’<sup>25</sup> Although the primary target of this put-down is nonviolence, it also refers to the cultural hybridity of the freedom songs. Preparation for, or committing, violence was somehow more black than singing songs. However, in his point on jazz, West betrays a lack of knowledge about Malcolm X’s life prior to 1964. Frank Kofsky recalls attending a 1963 rally at which Malcolm X’s speech was preceded by a performance from the Groove Holmes jazz trio. Kofsky mentions that Malcolm X’s opening remarks centred on how he had enjoyed the music, which suggests that the Black Muslim Malcolm X did not dismiss jazz out of hand.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Malcolm X’s reflections on his hustling days emphasise the role of drugs in the jazz scene – ‘in every band, at least half of the musicians smoked reefers.’<sup>27</sup> Much of his regular income came from musicians visiting Harlem who needed a fix. Given that Islam and the Black Muslims forbade any form of

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<sup>23</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p. 101.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Malcolm X, ‘Message to the Grass Roots’ p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970) pp. 251, 256.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* p. 187. See also p. 192. Bruce Perry suggests that there is no reason to doubt Malcolm X’s claims. Perry, *Malcolm* p. 73.

drug taking, it is unsurprising that Malcolm X rejected the transformative power of jazz, associating it simply with drugs and degeneracy. Although his inability to come to terms with the message of jazz conveniently fits with his racial sensibilities, to conclude that this was the only factor behind Malcolm X's opinion fails to take into account his first-hand experience and the influence of his religion.

Nor did Malcolm X dismiss culture in its entirety during this period. Ossie Davis remembers him attending a performance of Davis' *Purlie Victorious* in 1962 against the wishes of Elijah Muhammad. As Davis recalls,

Malcolm somehow managed to come and see a matinee [alone]... and he said, "you know, I think you're trying to do with laughter what I'm trying to do 'by any means necessary.' You're really zinging the Man and I appreciate that... I'll do anything I could to help you, except that if I said something in favor of the play no white folks would ever show up at the box office again... But I really enjoyed the play."<sup>28</sup>

Malcolm X might have appeared to reject culture, but Davis' quote suggests that the Muslim Malcolm X was aware that culture could be used for political purposes, although he would never be able to admit as much in public. Cornel West, therefore, slightly misses the point. Although Malcolm X could never publicly accept hybridity, he was always aware of the potential for the use of culture – both black and white – as a weapon. His chosen cultural sphere was history, where the Muslim Manichean impulse could easily be proven. It would be simple to criticise Malcolm X for his refusal to explore the use of culture as a weapon during this period. However, as Robin Kelley suggests, and Malcolm X's speeches illustrate, he was aware of the power of culture to dominate the individual in similar ways to politics and was able to harness this power to spread his – or rather Elijah Muhammad's – gospel. This period emphasises the long-term influences that acted on Malcolm X as his independent thought developed. It also suggests that he was not transformed solely by his trip to Africa, but over this long term and through the influence of Black Muslim doctrine.

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<sup>28</sup> Ossie Davis interview, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1990) p. 252.

## Amiri Baraka

If the movement convinced James Baldwin of his commitment to his art and spurred Dick Gregory on to even greater heights in his, then it fatally compromised the art of Amiri Baraka. Prior to his involvement with the freedom struggle, Baraka had been an acclaimed Beat poet. During the late 1950s, his poetry was beginning to find an audience, not least through his association with the Beat scene in Greenwich Village.<sup>29</sup> During this time Baraka could also be considered a political blank slate. He was convinced that his only duty was to his art – as he protested, ‘I’m a poet... What can I do? I write, that’s all, I’m not even interested in politics.’<sup>30</sup> The turning point in Baraka’s intellectual development was not his contact with the civil rights movement, but a July 1960 trip to Cuba. Afterwards, Baraka’s work became subsumed within his commitment to the black freedom struggle and, within five years, entered an irreversible decline. Although he had no formal links with the various civil rights organisations before the advent of Black Power, his experience provides for an illustrative example of the role of the artist within, and how art could be affected by, the movement. As Gerald Early notes, Baraka was – and remains – ‘an activist in the truest sense of the world, one who often mistook passion for clarity of thought.’<sup>31</sup>

Under the auspices of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), Baraka was invited to visit revolutionary Cuba alongside Julian Mayfield and his wife Ana Codero, the novelist Sarah Wright and her husband Ed Clark, Harold Cruse and Robert F. Williams.<sup>32</sup> Whilst in Havana, he was given a tour of the Casa de Las Americas, Cuba’s

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<sup>29</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* pp. 218-241; Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) pp. 27-42 for Baraka’s Beat period.

<sup>30</sup> LeRoi Jones, ‘Cuba Libre’ in LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966) p. 42. Baraka is recounting a conversation with a Cuban prior to his conversion to activism.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Early, ‘The Case of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’ in Gerald Early, *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989) p. 203.

<sup>32</sup> According to Baraka, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and John O. Killens were also invited, but declined to attend. Inexplicably, Ruth Reitan fails to note the existence of this trip, claiming that it was simply a visit by Robert F. Williams. It was, in fact, Williams’ second FPCC trip that year. Jones, ‘Cuba’ p. 13; Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 243; Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights*

new literary and cultural centre, which was devoted to the promotion of Cuban culture as an integral part of the revolution. Cynthia Young cites the Casa as one of the principal agents in a 'pan-American revolution in the arts.'<sup>33</sup> It undoubtedly had a profound effect on Baraka, illustrating the value of culture to revolutionary movements. Baraka, though, was stung by the barbs of a number of Cubans who denounced him as a 'cowardly bourgeois individualist' for his refusal to integrate politics with his art.<sup>34</sup> Alongside over 50,000 ecstatic Cubans, he witnessed the July 26<sup>th</sup> Celebration at Sierra Maestra, where he met Fidel Castro. Castro's characteristically long speech was followed by a concert featuring singers and dancers – 'a strange mixture of pop culture and mainstream highbrow *haute culture*,' according to Baraka.<sup>35</sup> The show climaxed in a Mexican Mardi Gras procession, which further confirmed to Baraka that culture and politics could and should operate hand in hand. While he was obviously impressed with the political fervour of the Cuban people, it is clear that the Cubans' understanding that culture was political was just as pertinent for Baraka.

Baraka later remarked that, following his Cuban excursion, 'I was turned *completely* around and began to go on a really aggressive attack as far as politics was concerned.'<sup>36</sup> The opening words of Baraka's travelogue of the Cuban trip gave notice of how he had been transformed: 'if we live our lives under lies, it becomes difficult to see *anything* if it does not have anything to do with these lies.'<sup>37</sup> Baraka was not

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*Movement* (New York: Norton, 2001) pp. 126-127; Ruth Reitan, *The Rise And Decline Of An Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999) pp. xi, 87; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) pp. 224-226. For the FPCC, Van Gosse, *Where The Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (London: Verso, 1993) pp. 108-110, 137-173, 207-211, 216-222, 240-245.

<sup>33</sup> Cynthia Young, 'Havana up in Harlem: LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse and the Making of a Cultural Revolution' *Science and Society* 65,1 (spring 2001) p. 5; Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 244.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, 'Cuba' p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 56. Baraka originally asserted that there were between 60 and 70,000 people present at the event. The vagaries of world inflation boosted that figure to nearly one million by the time of his autobiography. Harold Cruse contents himself with a detached 'thousands upon thousands' being present, although they did stretch 'as far as the eye could see.' *ibid.* p. 55; Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 245; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual: From its origins to the present* (London: W. H. Allen, 1967) p. 357.

<sup>36</sup> Baraka quoted in Tyson, *Radio* p. 232. Emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, 'Cuba' p. 11.



referring to Cuban propaganda. This statement, rather, was Baraka's declaration of political independence. As he commented, prior to his trip, he had never considered engaging with the political world. Cuba removed his blinkers. After describing his trip, Baraka expressed his exhilaration at the new ideas that he had encountered in Cuba and his new-found respect for revolutionary movements. He set about his Beat contemporaries for their refusal to engage in politics before concluding that the United States was too bound up in its own lies to offer salvation even for the truest political rebels. The final straw was a Miami newspaper headline reporting that the triumphant Sierra Maestra festival had been rained out.<sup>38</sup>

Cuba opened Baraka's eyes to the struggle of the oppressed throughout the world and convinced him of the need to address art to the African American freedom struggle. Soon after his return to the United States, Baraka withdrew from his Beat friends. He joined the New York chapter of the FPCC and began to work with the Monroe Defense Committee to assist Robert F. Williams in his struggle with the North Carolina authorities. He claims that he was even beaten outside the United Nations building for protesting the murder of Patrice Lumumba in February 1961.<sup>39</sup>

Baraka's work also began to change, a process signalled by the account of his visit to Cuba. Following the success of this work, Baraka embarked on writing a new prose piece, which was eventually published as *The System of Dante's Hell*. This period is the crucial spell in Baraka's literary career. After deciding that 'it was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must act!', Baraka became convinced that truth lay in these fleeting moments of action.<sup>40</sup> It led to Baraka's literary style becoming more attuned to the black freedom struggle, but less complex and nuanced. With his new-found and increasingly didactic attitude to politics, and without the wide-eyed

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* pp. 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 267. 'Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. Debate' *New York Times* 16 February 1961 p. 1 does not mention Baraka's involvement. Malcolm X, according to Peter Goldman, was a 'distant but interested spectator.' Goldman, *Death* p. 156.

<sup>40</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 246.

insouciance and sheer *joie de vivre* that characterised the best of the Beat writing, Baraka's work often became bogged down in simplistic ideological lessons populated by two-dimensional characters.

Baraka was less concerned with the southern civil rights movement than he was with the growing racial militancy of black culture in New York. By March 1962, he had taken on a regular column in the jazz periodical *Down Beat* and was reviewing new releases for *Jazz* and *Kulchur*. Previously a rather staid and conservative magazine, *Down Beat* looked down on the jazz avant-garde with suspicious (white) eyes.<sup>41</sup> Baraka attempted to lead the magazine towards an appreciation of free jazz, and its revolutionary political and musical qualities, with mixed responses from the readership.<sup>42</sup> Despite his lack of success with a white readership, Baraka's most successful writing of this time is perhaps his jazz criticism. In the midst of *Down Beat*'s struggles with the race issue, Baraka unleashed 'Jazz and the White Critic,' which highlights the racist irony of jazz criticism: whilst most innovative jazz musicians were black, the critical establishment were, almost to a man, white. The most important work of criticism by Baraka, the article explores the refusal of the cultural establishment to note the socio-cultural background that informed the best of black jazz and firmly rooted the music in the politics of its day. It also elevates feeling over virtuosity in the music, asserting that to transcribe it was to miss the point of the best jazz, which conveniently allows a political interpretation of free jazz. As Baraka asserts, 'the notes *mean something*; and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture.'<sup>43</sup> Two years earlier,

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<sup>41</sup> Ornette Coleman's music, for example, was frequently slated for its 'technical abominations' and its supposed contempt for the listener's intelligence. Don DeMichael, review of Ornette Coleman, *This Is Our Music*, *Down Beat* 28,10 (11 May 1961) p. 25 even compares Coleman's playing to 'the babblings of my 2-year-old daughter.'

<sup>42</sup> By the publication of *Down Beat* 29,7 (29 March 1962), Baraka was writing regularly for the magazine. The postbag soon filled up with reactions, some positive, most negative and a number vituperative and malicious.

<sup>43</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'Jazz and the White Critic' in LeRoi Jones (Amiri Imamu Baraka), *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1968) p. 15. Emphasis in original. The importance of this essay in the evolution of Baraka's thought is further confirmed by its position as the opening essay in *Black Music*, out of chronological order.

Baraka set out this political interpretation of jazz and asserts that feeling was the key to an understanding of the music – technical virtuosity and an adherence to European melodic restrictions were not necessarily crucial.<sup>44</sup> ‘Jazz and the White Critic’ also castigates the critical establishment for its middlebrow tendencies. Since “real” intellectuals did not designate jazz as high art, ‘hobbyists or boyishly brash members of the America petit bourgeoisie’ were allowed to dominate its criticism, with the resultant debasement of critical standards and the elevation of the mundane over the extraordinary.<sup>45</sup> Thus the critics, still infatuated with big band jazz, failed to appreciate hard bop when it arrived on the jazz scene and the music was forced to gain acceptance in the urban black clubs, a process that was repeating itself with free jazz. Baraka here is once again able to impose a political interpretation on the music – namely that white racism forced black musicians underground. However, the conclusion to the article remains puzzling. Baraka asserts that ‘Negro music, like the Negro himself, is strictly an American phenomenon,’ and that, in order to understand and criticise it, one must first understand and appreciate the ‘underlying philosophies and local cultural references’ behind it.<sup>46</sup> The assertion that jazz was American music does not conform to Baraka’s previous argument that the music was, almost exclusively, African-American, born out of the experience of the slaves and their descendants. In a number of respects, this is classic Baraka. He was unafraid of causing controversy, which the article was almost solely intended to provoke, and was quite happy to embrace contradictory statements, sometimes in order to further the controversy that he generated.

Baraka’s forays into jazz criticism led to the production of a full-length social history of African American music. *Blues People* remains Baraka’s most acclaimed non-theatrical work. Themes that were explored in his previous essays receive greater attention in *Blues People*, such as the role of class in listeners’ preferences and the relationship between the music and its socio-political surroundings. Critics still delight

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<sup>44</sup> LeRoi Jones, ‘The Jazz Avant-Garde’ (1961) *ibid.* pp. 69-80.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, ‘Jazz and the White Critic’ p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 20.

in debunking the inaccuracies and prejudices that are apparent in *Blues People*, but its assertions still retain a force (if not a coherence) that they contained in the early 1960s. Most 1960s critics homed in on Baraka's racial essentialism (often forgetting that he did occasionally give credit to certain white musicians) and his tendency to subsume the identity of individual musicians within their racial background.<sup>47</sup> Despite its limitations, *Blues People* remains an ambitious and pioneering attempt to construct a social history of African American music and composes part of Baraka's assault on white America's failings and the limitations of the civil rights movement.

Baraka's essays of the time were no less controversial. In 'The Myth of a Negro Literature,' (1962) Baraka accused African American writers, with 'a few notable exceptions,' of producing a body of stultifying, mediocre work. According to this essay, the only great art that black America had produced was, inevitably, music. The reason for this was that black musicians were generally not as middle-class as black writers, nor did they aspire to produce 'art.' For Baraka, black literature was too self-conscious, formalised and wedded to white cultural mores to be a true reflection of African American life.<sup>48</sup> Once again, Baraka vented his spleen with nary a care for the consequences. In this case, his analysis comes close to an exoticist celebration of the primitive. In its early days jazz was often treated as primitive music by white critics before being accepted through the more respectable appearance of white artists such as Glenn Miller and be-suited African Americans such as Duke Ellington. There is a suggestion that Baraka revelled in the lack of sophistication of black musicians, although he was to spend a number of years emphasising the sophistication of free jazz players in the face of much (white) criticism that they were a primitive throwback to

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<sup>47</sup> Baraka credits a long list of white musicians with understanding the roots and rhythm of bebop. He also acknowledges the importance of Woody Herman's white musicians and Bix Beiderbecke. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From it* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, second edition, 1995) pp. 150-155, 205, 206; Ralph Ellison, 'Blues People' (review of Jones, *Blues*) in Ralph Ellison, *Shadow And Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) pp. 247-258 criticises the book's polemics and argues that it does not come to terms with majoritarian culture; Don DeMichael, review of *Blues People*, *Down Beat* 31,1 (2 January 1964) p. 34 is more sanguine.

<sup>48</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'The Myth of a Negro Literature' in Jones, *Home* pp. 105-115. Quote p. 105. The essay was originally a speech delivered at the American Society for African Culture, 14 March 1962.

pre-melodic music. Naturally, the inconsistency between this argument and the one proposed in *Blues People* – as Josef Jarab puts it, of a *white black literature* and a *black black music* – was of little concern to Baraka.<sup>49</sup>

Baraka felt most at home within the structure of cultural revolution, especially that which was taking place in jazz. He was certainly convinced that this new wave of jazz was as valid a statement against white supremacy as the southern protests – ‘there was a newness and a defiance, a demand for freedom, politically and creatively, it was all connected,’ he later wrote. Baraka even took the struggle into the record shops of New York City, telling a clerk to ‘kiss my ass, right now,’ when the clerk asserted that black musicians should not confuse sociology with the music.<sup>50</sup> Baraka’s confidence in declaiming and exploring the cultural revolution in jazz could not, however, be extended to his writing on the civil rights movement. In his civil rights writing before 1964, Baraka comes across as a clichéd angry young man, opposing all forms of compromise and cynically critical of the actions of large organisations. In ‘Tokenism: 300 years for five cents’ (1962) Baraka lambasts liberal elites and the NAACP for emphasising small token gains of African Americans over the lack of general advancement of the black man. Baraka accuses the NAACP of being too influenced by its white liberal supporters and of being ‘completely out of touch with the great masses of blacks.’ He then takes sideswipes at the tokenism of Ralph Bunche, Jackie Robinson, *Ebony* and, by association, any African American in the public sphere.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in ‘What Does Nonviolence Mean?’ (1963) Baraka assails liberal America for allowing middle-class blacks the opportunity for advancement in return for Tomism and acceptance of white cultural hegemony. Again Jones aims at the larger civil rights organisations, accusing the NAACP, the SCLC and CORE of toadying middle class gradualism. Even SNCC was savaged for being in the thrall of King, especially after

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<sup>49</sup> Josef Jarab, ‘Black Aesthetic: A Cultural or Political Concept?’ *Callaloo* 25 (autumn 1985) p. 591.

<sup>50</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 261.

<sup>51</sup> LeRoi Jones, ‘Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents’ in Jones, *Home* pp. 76, 80.

John Lewis agreed to change his speech at the March on Washington.<sup>52</sup> Nonviolence, for Baraka at this time, represented only the perpetuation of the *status quo*, an opinion taken almost verbatim from Robert F. Williams, again confirming the importance of the Cuban trip to the development of Baraka's thought.<sup>53</sup> For Baraka, as for Williams, nonviolence was incapable of addressing the fundamental problems of American society and failed to challenge the assumption that black people were second-class citizens or to develop its own socio-economic programme. The easy targets that he chose during this period only serve to highlight his impotence.

Baraka's critique of the movement was more successful and pertinent when he directed his fire at the issue of black unity. As early as 1962, Baraka was advocating black nationalism as the solution to the racial crisis. This can be linked to his jazz criticism: Baraka was determined to emphasise the value of black musicians working together to ensure the end of white domination of jazz criticism and white control of jazz economics.<sup>54</sup> Baraka was aware of the struggles of black musicians to gain acceptance and a living in an industry that was controlled by whites and harboured a brooding resentment of whites who intended to muscle in on the scene. Thus black unity in jazz was a key to ensuring the success of black musicians – in Baraka's mind the same could be said for the civil rights movement, which was the message of his 1962 essay, "Black" is a Country.<sup>55</sup>

Given that Baraka was at this time consorting with only a small number of black activists in New York City, it is somewhat unsurprising that his engagement with the civil rights movement was so limited and, in many ways, predictable. Without an organisational base or the desire to join the mainstream movement, Baraka was restricted to commentating on it. He was slowly becoming more influenced by Malcolm

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<sup>52</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'What Does Nonviolence Mean?' *ibid.* pp. 134-137, 140.

<sup>53</sup> Baraka approvingly quotes Williams in his dissection of the failure of nonviolence. *ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>54</sup> Note also Baraka's disdain for white musicians whom he felt were exploiting the economic benefits of jazz without proper appreciation of the roots of the music. His dismissal of Chet Baker is particularly instructive. Jones, *Blues* p. 214.

<sup>55</sup> LeRoi Jones, "Black" is a Country' in Jones, *Home* pp. 82-86.

X's rhetoric but was unable to commit himself to the strictures of organisational affiliation other than on a small scale. Instead, Baraka preferred to use jazz criticism and leftist periodicals as a forum for criticising the movement and promoting his interpretation of the value of cultural revolution and racial unity.

### **Robert F. Williams**

Robert F. Williams was similarly galvanised by his experience in Cuba during 1960 and used the country as the base for his assault on America's ears and eyes during the early 1960s. After attracting a nationwide audience to the Monroe struggle as a result of the sensational Kissing Case, Williams found himself ever more isolated within the NAACP as a result of his frank espousal of the right to bear arms and defend his family and property.<sup>56</sup> As a result of his clashes with the NAACP leadership in the late 1950s, Williams was already aware of the benefits of propaganda to activism. In July 1959, he initiated the publication of *The Crusader*, a weekly newsletter about the movement which was designed to counteract the distortions of the NAACP and the white power structure.<sup>57</sup> Although the newsletter was not often explicit on the role of culture within the struggle, it was well aware of the value of history both in the hands of white supremacists and black freedom fighters. It often featured columns and articles on black history.<sup>58</sup> Further alienated by his support for the Cuban Revolution, Williams developed an aura of a maverick "crazy nigger" who behaved as though he had nothing to lose, which was cemented when he was forced into exile in order to save his own life.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, introduction to Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, new edition 1998) p. xxi. The Kissing Case even reached the pages of the French language socialist periodical *La Gauche*. Williams, *Negroes* p. 23; Tyson, *Radio* pp. 90-136.

<sup>57</sup> Robert F. Williams interview with James Mosby, Detroit, 22 July 1970 RJB588 p. 76. Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University. Hereafter cited as RJB0HC. Also Tyson, *Radio* p. 193.

<sup>58</sup> Editorial, *The Crusader* 2,24 (18 February 1961) p. 1. For *The Crusader*'s popularity, Tyson, *Radio* pp. 195-196.

<sup>59</sup> Tyson, *Radio* pp. 262-285.

Since childhood Williams had been aware of how history could be used to inspire and motivate people. He remembered his enjoyment of history lessons at school and the stories that he learned about black men deciding to fight in no-win situations rather than meekly accepting their fate. 'The type of thing that would really make you root for the black man and want him to win,' he said.<sup>60</sup> Thus Williams developed an awareness of what the black man was struggling against. Moreover, it taught him that the only honourable response to desperate situations was defiance. In *The Crusader*, Williams was not averse to comparing himself with other historical figures who advocated violence in order to redress injustice, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (although he ignored their position as slaveholders).<sup>61</sup> He would approvingly quote Fidel Castro, Bertrand Russell, and Kwame Nkrumah whilst castigating Ralph Bunche, Roger Wilkins and other 'Uncle Toms.'<sup>62</sup> Williams also raged against the Civil War Centennial. Beginning in January 1961, the Centennial featured both solemn ceremonies and occasionally bellicose battle re-enactments. Prior to the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, it provided an ideal opportunity for segregationists to celebrate the finest hours of the Confederacy, despite the aims of the US Civil War Centennial Commission to emphasise the national benefits (for whites) of the subsequent reconciliation. Williams was thoroughly unconvinced of the event and denounced the entire commemoration as a 'Centennial of shame... a sacrilege.'<sup>63</sup>

Williams' exile did not have adverse effects on *The Crusader*. In fact, the pamphlet improved whilst he was in Cuba. It benefited from greater printing quality and a decreased frequency of publication. The loss of up-to-date news of the Monroe movement was balanced by a greater appreciation of the national movement and more

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<sup>60</sup> Williams, interview with Robert C. Cohen pp. 31, 67. Robert C. Cohen papers, SHSW box 1 folder 6. Hereafter cited as RCP.

<sup>61</sup> 'Violence and Freedom' *The Crusader* 2,21 (31 December 1960) pp. 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the above issues of *The Crusader*.

<sup>63</sup> 'Centennial of Shame' *The Crusader* 2,25 (4 March 1961) p. 4; Robert Cook, 'From Shiloh to Selma: The Impact of the Civil War Centennial on the Black Freedom Struggle in the United States, 1961-65' in Brian Ward and Tony Badger (eds.), *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996) pp. 131-146.



room devoted to Williams' editorials. Although criticisms of egotism and concentration of editorial power might be levelled at Williams, his elevation of the struggle over his personality characterises *The Crusader*. It would have been understandable for Williams to use the pamphlet as a personal propaganda sheet, devoted to clearing his name with the FBI and the CIA. However, there is little evidence of Williams placing himself and his family at the centre of the freedom struggle – they were an example of the effects of white oppression, but the freedom struggle was not simply their struggle writ large.

In later years, Williams was to elaborate on the role of culture and heritage in the movement, maintaining that, 'we had to unite our people on the basics of our own Black heritage, our own Black culture, our own Black background and understand it through united Black action.'<sup>64</sup> Class, for him, was secondary to race, an attitude that did not endear Williams to a number of high-ranking Cuban Communists, especially when they listened to his radio programme.

In July 1962 Williams cheerfully announced to his friend Mae Mallory that he would soon be broadcasting a regular radio report on the freedom struggle in the United States from Cuba to be called *Radio Free Dixie*. 'Watch the sparks fly!' he chuckled.<sup>65</sup> Since an early age, Williams had been aware of the power of music. When he was in Chicago as a young man, he remembered seeing men joining street cars playing blues 'just like they were in a different world.' Williams noticed that the music 'completely insulated' the men from their physical existence and had the power to change their conception of the world and themselves.<sup>66</sup> As a child he heard Cuban radio broadcasts in North Carolina and knew that people would be listening if programmes were broadcast in English.<sup>67</sup> From the very beginning, *Radio Free Dixie* was conceived with music as an integral part of the broadcast. Williams wanted to use 'the hottest music in jazz,

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<sup>64</sup> Robert F. Williams interview with Mosby RJBOHC p. 200.

<sup>65</sup> Robert F. Williams letter to Mae Mallory, 18 July 1962. Robert Franklin Williams papers box 1. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Hereafter cited as RFW. See also *The Crusader* 4,2 (August 1962) p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Robert F. Williams interview with Cohen, July 1968 pp. 108-109. RCP box 1 folder 6.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* pp. 514, 627. RCP box 1 folder 9.

and... play a lot of progressive jazz and soul music that [was] not being used on radio.<sup>68</sup> According to Williams, *Radio Free Dixie* would experiment with 'a new psychological concept of propaganda... even the music would have certain meaning... this music would be played in such a way that it would complement the subject matter.'<sup>69</sup> He wanted to experiment with manipulating people's emotions through music, using it to accentuate the emotions that his commentary would exploit. The music that Max Roach addressed to the civil rights movement, such as his *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, was used alongside the free jazz experiments of Ornette Coleman; provocative music that would demand the attention of the listener, deliberately make people angry (as it often did reviewers) and provoke them to action.<sup>70</sup>

Aside from explicitly political music, Williams also wanted to experiment with the power of drums. Max Roach and Art Blakey's powerful drumming often utilised African polyrhythms that added urgency and complexity to their work, whilst suggesting a linkage with its African roots.<sup>71</sup> For Williams, music also produced an emotional reaction, one that he hoped to exploit, 'in the same vein as the preacher but it would have more of a political theme than religious – in other words, it was to adapt this religious concept to propaganda.'<sup>72</sup> Williams, naturally, would be cast as the preacher, with the drums used to whip the listeners into a heightened state of awareness before his sermon was to begin. Preacher Williams was able to benefit from a reciprocal

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p. 516. RCP box 1 folder 9.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p. 625. RCP box 1 folder 9.

<sup>70</sup> Roach's album was consciously addressed to the movement. Roach and his writing partner Oscar Brown Jr. constructed a suite that told the history of the African peoples' escape from oppression. Its cover featured Roach and his band sitting at a lunch counter, echoing the pictures of Joseph McNeil, Izell Blair, Franklin McCain and David Richmond sitting-in at Greensboro's downtown Woolworth's store. Max Roach, *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (New York: Candid, 1961); The St Clair Studio, press release c.1961. Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 1, frame 0452; Don DeMichael, review of Max Roach, *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, *Down Beat* 28,7 (March 30 1961) p. 30. Roach's outspoken support of the movement led to him being summoned to a *Down Beat* conference on racism in jazz. Anon, 'Racial Prejudice in Jazz, part I' *Down Beat* 29,6 (March 15 1962) pp. 20-26, 'Racial Prejudice in Jazz, part II' *Down Beat* 29,7 (March 29 1962) pp. 22-25.

<sup>71</sup> Polyrhythmic drumming can be heard on Roach, *We Insist!*; Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, *Moanin'* (New York: Blue Note, 1958), *The Witch Doctor* (New York: Blue Note, 1961) plus other albums.

<sup>72</sup> Williams interview with Cohen p. 626. RCP box 1 folder 9.

relationship with his listeners, relying on a few of them to donate new and ‘way-out’ records. In addition to selling review copies to keep him solvent, for example, Amiri Baraka sent various records to Williams. Baraka’s access to the burgeoning free jazz scene was obviously a boon to *Radio Free Dixie*.<sup>73</sup>

As the CIA reported, ‘using “jazz” terminology and frequently crude language, Williams tells his “oppressed North American brothers” that they are going to have to “fill a lot of jails and a lot of graves and not just with black boys, either,” in order to achieve “freedom and social justice.”’<sup>74</sup> Over the stentorian drumming of *Radio Free Dixie*’s introduction track, Mabel Williams would announce, ‘from Havana, Cuba, free territory of the Americas,’ as the drumming gave way to ragtime clarinets and brass, ‘*Radio Free Dixie* invites you to listen to the free voice of the South.’ ‘Stay with us for music, news and commentary by Robert F. Williams,’ urged Mrs. Williams as the drumming returned, bringing tension and a brooding atmosphere as if to indicate the magnitude of what was to follow.<sup>75</sup>

The link between African American music and the freedom movement was made clear from the very beginning of each broadcast. Musical hostess Jo Salas would introduce music such as ‘Seed Shack’ by Jug Ammons before moving to Mabel Williams’ folklore section. Mabel Williams would often read from Langston Hughes’ prose and poetry; ‘When a Man Sees Red’ was suggestively selected for one show.<sup>76</sup> Robert Williams’ commentary on the freedom struggle would be introduced by ‘John

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<sup>73</sup> LeRoi Jones to Robert F. Williams, 18 December 1962. RFW box 1. Williams interview with Cohen pp. 623, 625. RCP box 1 folder 9.

<sup>74</sup> CIA Foreign Broadcast Information Division, Office of Operations, Special Memorandum on ‘Havana’s International Broadcasting’ 31 January 1963 page I-1. I wish to thank Professor Tim Tyson for directing me towards this material.

<sup>75</sup> Undated broadcast cassette of *Radio Free Dixie*, courtesy of Professor Tim Tyson. *Radio Free Dixie* always featured the same introduction, indicated in the transcripts. Monty Kelly’s ‘I Can’t Sit Down’ from *Porgy and Bess* was normally used as the introduction theme although, in its first broadcasts, *Radio Free Dixie* began with a ragtime song entitled ‘Dixieland.’ Both titles illustrate the humour that runs through much of Williams’ critiques of America at this time, which is often ignored by historians. I wish to thank Professor Tyson (again) for allowing me to listen to his recordings of *Radio Free Dixie*.

<sup>76</sup> Transcript of *Radio Free Dixie* 27 July 1962 p. 1. Courtesy Tim Tyson. Also in RFW. Langston Hughes, ‘When a Man Sees Red’ (1943), <http://eblackstudies.org/organisation/intro/chapter7.htm> (26/3/03). Also collected in Hughes, *Simple Speaks His Mind*.

Brown's Body,' thereby linking Williams with the interracial abolitionist crusade and, more specifically and pointedly, with the martyred militant who was one of the few whites that Williams admired. Williams' apocalyptic commentary typically castigated the hypocrisy and delusional self-righteousness of the United States government, hammering home the gulf between American ideals and American reality and reminding all who listened of the horror and fear of being black and American. Williams developed a worldwide concept of the struggle for equality and rarely failed to invoke the ramifications of the Cold War in his monologues.<sup>77</sup> As he had written in *Negroes With Guns*, rather than simply being a black nationalist – a label that he considered meaningless – he thought of himself as 'an *Inter-Nationalist*.'<sup>78</sup> After a reading of the weeks' news by Carlos Moore, the introduction theme would draw the programme to a close.<sup>79</sup> Although some in the Cuban government hierarchy felt that jazz was imperialist music, Williams was able to proceed with his plan to comment on the myriad aspects of the American freedom struggle from Cuba. The broadcast signal of *Radio Free Dixie* was so powerful that the programme could be heard throughout the South and, thanks to an underground railroad of broadcasters and private individuals, recordings spread through many areas of the North.<sup>80</sup> By March 1963, the programme was being aired three times per week, allowing for even more recording and dissemination.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See, for example, transcript of *Radio Free Dixie* 10 August 1962 pp. 4-5 in which Williams accused 'the racist U.S. government,' of being, 'hell-bent on provoking armed conflict with the Cuban people. A conflict that could very well lead to a third world war.' Courtesy Tim Tyson. Also in RFW.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, *Negroes* p. 82. Emphasis in original.

<sup>79</sup> Broadcast cassette, transcript of *Radio Free Dixie* 27 July 1962, courtesy Tim Tyson.

<sup>80</sup> See for example, James H. Williams to Robert F. Williams, 12 October 1962. RFW box 1. James Williams lived in Louisville, Kentucky, and reported that 'though the signal was weak and fading, *the message was not*.' Emphasis in original. Tyson, *Radio* pp. 287-288 details the geographical distance that the programme covered. Williams also claimed to have received letters from white Navy officers, Canadians and Britons who heard the show. Although they did not necessarily agree with the politics that Williams espoused, many apparently entreated Williams to continue playing his 'real cool' music. Williams interview with Cohen pp. 622-627. RCP box 1 folder 9.

<sup>81</sup> Robert F. Williams to Richard Elman, of WRAI radio 26 February 1963. RFW box 1. WRAI, a New York radio station, frequently rebroadcast editions of *Radio Free Dixie*. The programme would be repeated twice per week. See also *The Crusader* 4,6 (February 1963).

Throughout this time, Williams retained his tendency to sneer at any form of organisation. He became frustrated with the Cuban attitude to propaganda, possibly as a result of criticism from the party hierarchy that he was unwittingly peddling imperialist nonsense in the form of jazz music, hindered further by his resistance to developing a communist interpretation of the African American dilemma.<sup>82</sup> Williams was a passionate believer in the African roots of jazz, and wrote as such in response to this criticism, arguing that music that originated from slaves simply could not be described as imperialist. That the white man was exploiting the music did not render it imperialist.<sup>83</sup> To Williams, his use of the music was returning it to its original intention as music of the oppressed. Thus Williams acknowledged that art could be subverted, yet also have its message reconfirmed, by the changing context in which it was heard – a situation that Williams took full advantage of through his programme. He opened minds to the African American freedom struggle and also to new forms of music, uniting the two to create a hugely powerful and relevant piece of propaganda. Music played an integral role in his propaganda and Williams ensured that his listeners heard music that emphasised blackness and all struggles against oppression.

## **Conclusion**

An examination of these three black nationalist figures broadens our conception of the relationship between black nationalism and black culture. It reveals that the links between black nationalists and their culture began to develop in the early 1960s. The development of Malcolm X's thought in the early 1960s suggests that his linking of the black freedom struggle with black history had its roots not simply in his African sojourn but also in Black Muslim ideology. History, it seems, was always vital to Malcolm X's

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<sup>82</sup> Williams interview with Cohen pp. 516, 523, 527, 546, RCP box 1 folder 9 for Williams' struggle with rigid Cuban Communists over the issue of imperialist music. Williams certainly believed that his programme represented a path-breaking use of propaganda, asserting on p. 523 that the Cubans had an outmoded and rigid conception of propaganda. This despite the Casa De Las Americas.

<sup>83</sup> Williams interview with Cohen pp. 580-582. RCP box 1 folder 9.

conception of freedom. Between 1960 and 1963, he came to appreciate the role that culture could play in the struggle, although his membership of the Nation of Islam precluded him speaking out on the importance of such frippery. Robert F. Williams also concluded that culture could be a weapon in the struggle, but he found the support in Cuba through which he could realise his ideas. He had been aware of the power of music and history since a young age, and the civil rights movement presented him with a means through which he could test out his theories. As the civil rights war raged in the South, Williams used jazz and the songs of the movement to reinforce his conviction that black and white Americans were in a struggle to the death. Baraka's relationship with the movement is less clear at this point. Although he was fully convinced that art should carry a political message, his alienation from the various civil rights organisations placed constraints on his involvement with the movement. Instead, he commented it from afar. His writing from this period expands on the work of Malcolm X and Robert Williams by explicitly linking jazz with the freedom movement while castigating the civil rights organisations' lack of radicalism.

The examples of Malcolm X, Baraka and Williams suggest that there are a number of strands within the black nationalist cultural impulse during this period. Malcolm X's interpretation derives from a critique of hybrid movement culture and the failure of a viable separate black culture. Williams, too, developed his conception of the use of culture through his critique of the civil rights movement. Although these might appear to be similar positions, Malcolm X's philosophy developed outside the movement, whereas Williams' derived from his frustrations *within* the movement. As such, they also represent different strands of 1960s black nationalist thought. Baraka's interpretation of the use of culture, on the other hand, develops out of the broad leftist movement in the post-war years. His first encounter with political activism came through the sponsorship of the FPCC, which had links with both the Old and the New Left. In fact, only the involvement of Robert F. Williams gives indication of any links

between the FPCC and the civil rights movement.<sup>84</sup> Baraka remained aloof from the civil rights movement, choosing to ally himself with Williams' struggle in Monroe and the worldwide struggle against racial oppression. However, as his racial identity – and his own sensitivity towards it – asserted itself, Baraka felt that he had to separate himself from these links in order to maintain his image as a black radical. Baraka was not wooed by any of the organisations during this time but assisted in the development of pressure groups in Harlem, with limited success.<sup>85</sup>

Although neither man found himself involved to a large extent with any of the civil rights organisations during this period, all came to similar conclusions that a movement based on racial unity should be taking notice of the value of culture as an organising tool. Malcolm X and Baraka emerged from the North and Williams from the South. The middle-class Baraka and working-class Williams initially entered the armed forces, while Malcolm X conscientiously avoided induction. All learned at an early age that the white power structure was no friend of the black man. Independently they concluded that culture could be used as a political weapon and as an organising tool in the African American freedom struggle. Taken together, the three suggest that late-1960s black nationalism was not only a critique of the mainstream civil rights movement, but that it also grew out of the very same movement.

Most historians follow William L. Van Deburg's suggestion that the Black Power era began in 1965, following the death of Malcolm X and that summer's riot or rebellion (depending on one's political persuasion) in Watts.<sup>86</sup> Studies that explore the development of black nationalism in the period immediately prior to these events are

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<sup>84</sup> Gosse, *Where* pp. 138-147.

<sup>85</sup> Note, for example, the failure of Baraka's Organization of Young Men, formed in 1961, which merged with the On Guard for Freedom group, dismissed in Cruse, *Crisis* pp. 368-371; Watts, *Amiri* pp. 85-86. See also Baraka, *Autobiography* pp. 248-251.

<sup>86</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 1-10, *passim*. See also Branch, *Pillar* p. 95; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 191-303; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (New York: Da Capo, 1995).

rare.<sup>87</sup> Although Harold Cruse examines the growth of what he terms Afro-American Nationalism during the early 1960s, his analysis is sorely limited by his personal quibbles with the many characters that inhabit his book.<sup>88</sup> Malcolm X, Baraka and Williams represent the immediate historical context from which Black Power emerged. Together they demonstrate the growing importance of black culture to the 1960s variant of black nationalism. Whilst their influence was not immediately apparent, it grew larger during 1964 before peaking in the late 1960s.

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<sup>87</sup> Tyson, *Radio* is the most successful of such works. Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) de-emphasises Baraka's politics before 1965. Carson, *In Struggle* pp. 9-190; Horne, *Fire* pp. 1-42 explore the developments that led to Black Power, but do not acknowledge these developments as part of a Black Power movement.

<sup>88</sup> Cruse, *Crisis* pp. 356-381.



## 4.

# **‘Education in Mississippi... must be reconstructed from the ground up’: Culture and the 1964 Summer Project**

In a number of respects, 1964 was a watershed year for the civil rights movement. The passage of the Civil Rights Act served notice on the end of Jim Crow and indicated that the political message of the movement was being heard. While the movement capitalised on the momentum that it had built up over the previous two years, it also made serious attempts to engage with African American culture. This chapter positions SNCC’s 1964 Summer Project in Mississippi as the central event of the year.<sup>1</sup> In political terms, the Summer Project was SNCC’s Rubicon, during which its staff discovered that American liberalism was not necessarily the movement’s ally. Inspired in part by Highlander’s concept of education, the Summer Project intended to utilise African American culture to broaden the political message of the movement and include heretofore alienated members of the black community in the freedom movement. An examination of the themes contained within the Project’s aims and actions indicates that SNCC was coming to the conclusion that African American culture was a viable organising tool. While SNCC’s earlier organising efforts had included cultural elements – folk songs, the Freedom Singers, even Dick Gregory’s comedy – the Summer Project

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<sup>1</sup> Only recently has the Summer Project been renamed – by historians – Freedom Summer. SNCC workers simply referred to it as ‘the Summer Project,’ hence its designation in this work. Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, new edition 1990) p. xx. Title quote: Charles Cobb quoted in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) p. 259.

was SNCC's most effective attempt to unite culture and politics in order to broaden the parameters of the civil rights movement. The project crystallised the value of a cultural approach to movement work, integrating music, theatre, art, poetry and history into the development of political awareness among the black population. Children and adults were exposed to African American culture and were encouraged to delve into their past and present in order to develop the secular psychological armour needed to sustain their political struggle. SNCC's experience of organising prior to 1964 led the group to conclude that one of its failures was its inability to get deep into the community. Simply stimulating local people to action was not deemed enough to justify SNCC's existence. Thus many in SNCC concluded that education and culture were crucial to the establishment of links between the organisation and local people. The Summer Project, the central event in SNCC's history, was the apotheosis of this impulse and of Highlander's influence on the organisation. Following Freedom Summer, SNCC became ever more radical and grew ever more aware of the value of black culture to the emerging Black Power generation. Thus, the Summer Project represents the great turning point in SNCC's history and is arguably the event which transformed the entire civil rights movement. While SNCC was immersing itself in the wider ramifications of the freedom struggle, CORE undertook similar organising efforts with a more ambivalent approach to the use of culture as a weapon. Although Dave Dennis adopted SNCC's approach to freedom schools in Mississippi's Fifth Congressional District, the organisation as a whole preferred to focus on the political effects of freedom education and attempted to use the freedom schools as a recruitment device.

In 1964, even certain members of the SCLC were becoming attuned to the benefits of a cultural approach to civil rights agitation. By July 1964, the organisation's newsletter was carrying a regular Negro history feature which informed the readers of little vignettes in African American history, such as Crispus Attucks' short-lived

involvement in the American War of Independence.<sup>2</sup> In the same month, Wyatt Walker wrote of the ‘cultural blackout’ of black people from American history and the resultant psychological effects of such white washing. ‘Unless the “cultural-blackout” is lifted,’ he warned, ‘unless we develop within ourselves a sense of history that is transmitted to all America, we may risk all that we have gained.’<sup>3</sup>

Walker felt that this campaign could be one of the new frontiers of the civil rights movement. In fact, Walker was then in the process of cementing his relationship with African American history and culture. Having tendered his resignation from the SCLC late in 1963 as a result of a spat with James Bevel and his own perceived lack of recognition for the Birmingham success (and a concomitant pay rise), Walker was about to begin a two-year contract to supervise the development of the Negro Heritage Library programme. This project was to document the history of the black community for use in public school textbooks.<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King gave his full blessing to Walker’s departure, stating that Walker was ideally suited to ‘this significant and monumental task.’<sup>5</sup> For Walker, this project was fundamental to the freedom struggle: ‘the current Negro revolution underscores a deliberate exclusion of the Negro’s contribution to American history. Corrective legislation is of little avail if the Negro does not have self-confidence, bred of the assurance that he does possess a definite historical frame of reference – that he belongs in America.’<sup>6</sup> The Negro Heritage Library was a deliberate

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<sup>2</sup> *SCLC Newsletter* 2,8 (July-August 1964) Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 3 reel 4 frame 00322. Hereafter cited as SCLC.

<sup>3</sup> Wyatt T. Walker column in *SCLC Newsletter* 2,8 (July-August 1964) p. 10 SCLC part 3 reel 4 frame 0330.

<sup>4</sup> SCLC press release, 23 June 1964. SCLC part 3 reel 5 frame 00388. Taylor Branch focuses on Walker’s disgust at the SCLC’s failure to recognise his genius contribution to the Birmingham campaign by offering him a pay rise as the reason for his departure. Adam Fairclough believes that an argument over James Bevel’s insubordination was equally important and David Garrow neatly bisects the two. Garrow also reveals Walker’s destination. Taylor Branch, *Pillar Of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) pp. 145, 190; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 164-165; David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1986) pp. 318, 321, 337.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., statement re departure of Wyatt T. Walker, 23 June 1964. SCLC part 3 reel 5 frame 00390.

<sup>6</sup> Wyatt T. Walker, statement re departure from SCLC, 23 June 1964. SCLC part 3 reel 5 frame 00391.

attempt to address these issues and bolster the civil rights movement's political campaign. King's blessing was a convenience, given Walker's desire to leave and King's colleagues' similar feelings towards Walker. That the first post deemed suitable for a person with Walker's skills involved working within African American culture suggests that the SCLC was becoming aware of the wider parameters of the movement.

Meanwhile, the Citizenship Education Program continued to educate and register adults using the Highlander technique. It made small inroads into Mississippi during 1964 although, despite King's support for the project, the organisation made only a negligible contribution to the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), the umbrella organisation established to co-ordinate civil rights activism in Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

### **SNCC and the Summer Project**

On 30 December 1963, SNCC's executive committee approved Bob Moses' proposal for a summer voter registration project involving hundreds of white volunteers.<sup>8</sup> Initially intended to highlight the brutality inherent in Mississippi's culture and to register large numbers of disfranchised black voters, the plans expanded to include more long term and holistic methods of addressing civil rights that encompassed what SNCC and its sister organisations in Mississippi called 'educational and social' programmes.<sup>9</sup> As freedom schools co-ordinator Liz Fusco asserted, this represented an acceptance that what could be done in Mississippi,

could be deeper, more fundamental, more far-reaching, more revolutionary than voter registration alone... [It was] a decision to enter into every phase of the lives of the people of

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<sup>7</sup> 'SCLC Citizenship Education Program (Mississippi)' c.1964. Sandra Hard papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW). Hereafter cited as SHP. Fairclough, *To Redeem* p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> See Minutes of SNCC Executive Committee 27-31 December 1963, Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 3 frames 0305-0324 for details of these meetings. Hereafter cited as SNCC. Also James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985) p. 372.

<sup>9</sup> Anon, 'Mississippi: Structure of the Movement, Present Operations, and Prospectus for this summer' n.d. 1964 p. 3. SNCC reel 6 frame 0049.

Mississippi... a decision to set the people free for politics in the only way that people really can become free, and that is totally.<sup>10</sup>

Community centres and freedom schools were central to SNCC's programme. Both institutions emphasised that knowledge of one's culture was crucial to the individual. In the case of the freedom schools, students would be encouraged to think freely and develop their own ideas about a free society. Charles Cobb, who conceived the idea of the freedom schools, envisaged the schools to be places 'where the students could freely ask questions about all those things, political as well as academic, which troubled and excited them.'<sup>11</sup>

Movement historiography has generally been reluctant to examine the schools in depth.<sup>12</sup> Charles Payne suggests that the roots of this historiographical oversight derive from the attitude of movement participants themselves to the schools. Noting that the 'prestige assignment' for volunteers and staff in 1964 was voter registration, Payne argues that the schools and the teaching were accorded relatively little respect. Many freedom school workers were female. Given SNCC's well-documented struggles with the gender issue at this time, the inference is clear.<sup>13</sup> John Dittmer further notes that teachers were liable to be called up to the front line of SNCC's voter registration campaign. Although Payne suggests that the freedom schools were something of an

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<sup>10</sup> Liz Fusco, 'Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964' p. 1. SNCC reel 39 frame 0005. This document formed the basis for Fusco's November 1964 *Liberation* article entitled 'Deeper Than Politics.'

<sup>11</sup> Cobb cited in anon, untitled document, n.d. p. 1 Howard Zinn papers, SHSW box 2 folder 2. Hereafter cited as ZP. The layout of the Zinn papers in this folder suggests that this document is Staughton Lynd, 'Mississippi Freedom Schools: Retrospect and Prospect' July 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Clayborne Carson grants the freedom schools less than five pages in his study of SNCC and Howard Zinn is similarly brief in his history of the organisation – curiously so, given his involvement in the project. Doug McAdam prefers to focus on its effects on SNCC activists and the white volunteers, with a particular interest in the sexual dynamics of the summer suggesting that the Summer Project ultimately failed to transform, or even affect, the people of Mississippi. Nicolaus Mills similarly focuses on the effects of the freedom schools on the teachers. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 109-111, 119-121; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) pp. 247, 249; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 66-115, *passim*; Nicolaus Mills, *Like A Holy Crusade: Mississippi 1964 – The Turning of the Civil Rights Movement in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1992) pp. 122-128.

<sup>13</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got The Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) p. 305. See also minutes of 5<sup>th</sup> District COFO staff meeting, 14-17 April 1965 p. 11 in which James Forman criticises SNCC staff for letting freedom school teachers do their own thing without interest from voter registration workers. Social Action Vertical File (SAVF), SHSW box 47.

afterthought, there is little doubt that they were central to the operation of the Summer Project and, as Dittmer acknowledges, they were one of the summer's major achievements.<sup>14</sup>

The schools are crucial to an understanding of SNCC's ethos and of the unsensational aspects of the 1964 Summer Project. As a SNCC document attested, the schools were integral to COFO's 1964 activities, providing new leadership and constituting 'a real attack on the presently stifling system of education,' in Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> SNCC envisaged these schools to become the foundation for a state-wide youth movement which would eventually take over SNCC's role in the community and produce a new generation of community leaders. SNCC defined the problem areas that needed addressing as the numeracy and literacy skills of adults and children and the lack of cultural knowledge amongst the black population.<sup>16</sup> Freedom schools would offer remedial instruction in basic educational skills and expose the students to 'cultural influences which [we]re not normally available,' in the Mississippi education structure.<sup>17</sup> The core curriculum consisted of supplementary education in English language, mathematics, history and other basic educational subjects, political and social studies, literature and film studies, plus cultural programmes such as art, music, dance, drama, creative writing and the appreciation of the above. Reflecting Highlander's citizenship schools, SNCC intended the curriculum to derive from the students' background and planned to base classroom activities around the students' experiences, thus ensuring that school activities remained fully grounded in Mississippian culture. As Jane Stembridge suggested to new freedom school teachers, 'rather than discuss the concept of economic pressure as such, you talk about Capitol Street in Jackson and how many of the stores have been closed down. The students will begin to understand these

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<sup>14</sup> Dittmer, *Local* pp. 260-261.

<sup>15</sup> Anon, 'Prospectus for the Summer' c. 1964 p. 2. ZP box 2 folder 12.

<sup>16</sup> John O'Neal and Lois Chaffee, letter to Myles Horton, March 1964. Highlander Research and Education Center records, SHSW box 41 folder 6. Hereafter cited as HREC.

<sup>17</sup> Anon, 'Mississippi: Structure' p. 3. SNCC reel 6 frame 0049.

concepts, *but as realities*.<sup>18</sup> The aim of the curriculum, in traditional educational (and gender) terms, was 'to challenge the student's curiosity about the world, [and] introduce him to his particularly "Negro" cultural background.'<sup>19</sup> The morning sessions normally included the black history section of the curriculum, indicating that cultural activities were integral to the curriculum and not simply restricted to recreation time. The more explicitly cultural aspect of the curriculum was designed both to provide for relaxation from the students' more intense studies and to give them the opportunity to express themselves more freely and in new ways. SNCC was also aware that it was simply too much to expect teenagers to concentrate on structured academic work for an entire day: relaxed work such as art and music would be a useful release, especially in the blazing afternoon sun.

SNCC's community centres provided a similar function to the schools, offering educational and recreational structures for local communities, although only 13 were established during the summer. Again, educational programmes were central to their operation. Instruction in job training, literacy, pre- and post-natal care, nutritional advice, home improvement and extracurricular programmes for grade school and high school children were all available. Similarly, the community centres provided a space for cultural activities in order 'to broaden the cultural horizons' of local people.<sup>20</sup> SNCC intended to show films that the black community would not have seen, to provide music appreciation classes and workshops alongside arts and crafts workshops, literature, drama, current affairs, sport and performances from outside entertainers. Naturally, visitors would be able to take advantage of the citizenship education that was available at the centres, which would include instruction in American and African American

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Stembridge, 'Freedom Schools Teaching Guide' p. 2. Papers of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (SNCC papers, appendix A) reel 67 frame 0316. Hereafter cited as SNCC-MFDP (the reel numbers for the SNCC-MFDP papers run consecutively from the SNCC papers). Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> COFO publication, 'Adopt a Freedom School' n.d. p. 4. SNCC reel 6 frame 0054.

<sup>20</sup> Lois Chaffee, memo 'to everybody interested in or working in the community center program' n.d. p. 1. Stuart Ewen papers, SHSW box 1 folder 1.

history, and assistance in using federal anti-poverty programmes.<sup>21</sup> In slight contrast to the freedom schools, the community centres were conceived as a permanent institution and as a focal point for the entire community, to help 'breathe democracy into the political processes of the state.'<sup>22</sup> These initiatives developed out of SNCC's concept of parallel structures: institutions that challenged the state's failure to provide for the basic needs of its black citizenry. As the freedom school prospectus established, '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.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Freedom school education**

At the beginning of the Summer Project, there were 41 functioning schools in twenty communities spread throughout Mississippi. 2,135 students had enrolled by 26 July – double the expected number.<sup>24</sup> Aviva Futorian, a teacher in Holly Springs, said that she had never seen so many people 'anxious for books.'<sup>25</sup> Howard Zinn emphasises the stimulus that the freedom schools provided their students to 'look into new worlds... to reach beyond their street, [and] beyond their state.'<sup>26</sup> This broader perspective, however, was not confined to the students. Volunteers were urged to question what brought them to Mississippi, whether middle-class whites could truly understand what it meant to be

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<sup>21</sup> Anon, 'Mississippi: Structure' p. 5. SNCC reel 6 frame 0050; COFO memo, 'Overview of the Community Centers' n.d. SNCC reel 38 frame 0106.

<sup>22</sup> Unknown author, 'Outline for Maureen Murphy' December 1963 p. 7. Mendy Samstein papers, SHSW, one folder.

<sup>23</sup> 'Adopt a Freedom School' p. 2. SNCC reel 6 frame 0053.

<sup>24</sup> COFO document 'Freedom School Data' p. 1. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0208 gives the figures; Carson, *In Struggle* p. 119 the expectations. Len Holt suggests that 3,000 students attended freedom schools. Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End: The Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Project of 1964* (New York: Da Capo, 1992) p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> Aviva Futorian, letter to parents n.d. p. 2. Elizabeth Sutherland papers, SHSW microfilm reel 1 frame 190. Hereafter cited as ESP.

<sup>26</sup> Zinn, *SNCC* pp. 248-249.



black and why many African Americans simply did not trust white liberals. Their commitment to nonviolence also had to be re-affirmed at regular intervals and they were encouraged to question what freedom meant to them and to their students. A teachers' handout that featured these questions concluded that 'these questions can go on for ever, and they are at the core of America in 1964.'<sup>27</sup> Fundamentally, the teachers had to challenge themselves. Their biggest hurdle, according to Florence Howe, was 'to learn how to listen and to question creatively rather than to talk at the students.'<sup>28</sup> For example, the teachers tried to redirect students' attention from leaving the South to move north as soon as possible by provoking debates on the status and condition of northern blacks. However, for many students this was not enough, since the North represented escape. As Liz Fusco notes, 'they did not change their minds just because the truth about the North began to shatter their dream of it as a paradise. Their need to escape stemmed from the fact that they really did not know what it was about Mississippi that they hated.'<sup>29</sup> The freedom schools directly challenged these thoughts.

SNCC's newsletter quoted northern black freedom school teachers Ralph Featherstone and Carolyn Reese stating that the most valuable legacy of the schools was the black history curriculum. Previously, Featherstone pointed out 'the only thing our kids knew about Negro history is about Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver and his peanuts.'<sup>30</sup> Joseph Ellin had a similar experience in Hattiesburg. Washington and Carver were the only African American names that his adult class could remember. The children were little better off, stereotypically being able to name a

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<sup>27</sup> SNCC handout, 'Basic Question: What Are Freedom Schools For and What Do You Want From Them' n.d. p. 4. Lise Vogel papers, SHSW, one folder. Hereafter cited as VP.

<sup>28</sup> Florence Howe, 'Mississippi's Freedom Schools: The Politics of Education' in Florence Howe, *Myths of Coeducation: Selected Essays 1964-1983* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Liz Fusco, 'Deeper Than Politics' *Liberation* November 1964 p. 17. Sally Belfrage believes this to be one of the major accomplishments of the Summer Project. Belfrage, *Freedom* p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Featherstone quoted in 'Freedom Schools Mississippi' in *The Student Voice*, 5 August 1964 p. 3. Clayborne Carson and the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project (eds.), *The Student Voice 1960-1965: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1990) p. 181.

few musicians and athletes.<sup>31</sup> Ellin found that his students were keenest to learn about their history. Through learning about African American history, the matrix of African American protest became clear to the students – the links between Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Douglass and James Forman, and gospel music and the freedom songs started to take shape in the students' minds.

Schools would begin each day with freedom songs before heading into the more structured activities. For some teachers, the songs themselves were a transformative experience. Pamela Parker told her parents that the songs were a 'most momentous thing,' that exemplified the physical and spiritual unity of the movement.<sup>32</sup> Sandra Hard was always at pains to emphasise the role of singing and cultural activities at the Holly Springs freedom school. Marcia Hall noted that freedom songs were particularly charged after a session on the civil rights movement.<sup>33</sup> Bonnie Guy, a freedom school teacher in Shaw, also noted 'the hearty singing of freedom songs... prevent[ing] despair [*sic*]' among local people and noticed the popularity of history books with the adults who visited the freedom school.<sup>34</sup> Inspired by the singing at the schools, Clarksdale students and community centre visitors established their own choir, despite the absence of a piano or printed music, an act which reflects the orality of the African American singing tradition.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of support from Professors Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynd, SNCC became aware of the lack of black history and literature in the regular curriculum. Both academics believed in the concept of a usable past and encouraged SNCC to follow this direction. One SNCC document called black history white America's 'blind spot.' 'The average American public school,' it asserted, 'has continued to teach the standard

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ellin, letter 'to Gazette,' 10 July 1964 p. 3. ESP reel 1 frame 158.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela Parker, letter to 'Mom and Dad' 2 April 1964 p. 1. ESP reel 1 frame 531.

<sup>33</sup> Sandra Hard, letters to parents, 6 July, 18 July 1964. SHP; Marcia Hall, 'Canton, Mississippi Freedom School Report' July 1964. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frames 0236-0239.

<sup>34</sup> Bonnie Guy, letter to 'many friends,' 18 July 1964 pp. 2,4. VP. Quote p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Zeman, 'Clarksdale Community Center' report p. 2. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0374.

bleached product, devitalized, at best, in its absence of reference to Negro achievement and participation in American life; poisoned, at worst, in its falsehoods and distortions concerning the role of the Negro.<sup>36</sup> To address this, SNCC solicited charities, organisations and individuals to provide books that emphasised the black contribution to American life. A freedom school advertisement claimed that ‘the most important part of the school will be the courses on Negro history, citizenship and American Government.’<sup>37</sup> Even at the preliminary stage, the curriculum was designed to link the 1960s movement with the African American oppositional tradition, emphasising the history of struggle amongst many generations of black Americans. Through an awareness of these movements, SNCC hoped that a new generation of leadership would emerge.<sup>38</sup> Just as New Left historians such as Lynd strove to establish through their writing that the protest tradition was inherently American, SNCC intended to establish the African American contribution to the United States. Thus history would justify and elaborate on SNCC’s insistence that Mississippian blacks play a full role in state politics.

A special concern of the course was to explore African American contributions to American culture, again emphasising SNCC’s insistence that culture was one of the keys to liberation. Thus, *The Souls of Black Folk*, John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom*, Carter G. Woodson’s *Negro Makers of History* and Langston Hughes’ *A Pictorial History of the Negro People in the United States* formed the core of the history curriculum. The September 1963 issue of *Ebony*, a commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation, was also used as a supplementary text in some schools.<sup>39</sup> Biographies of Harry Belafonte and Frederick Douglass examined notable black figures. Pen portraits of figures such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Frederick Douglass and Crispus Attucks emphasised the multifaceted contributions of African Americans to American

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<sup>36</sup> ‘White America’s Blind Spot: Negro History’ n.d. p. 2. SNCC-MFDP reel 64 frame 1207.

<sup>37</sup> Advert for Freedom Community Center, Shaw, Mississippi, n.d. p. 3. VP.

<sup>38</sup> See ‘Curriculum Planning for Summer Project’ n.d. p. 1. ZP box 2 folder 2.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, ‘Canton’ pp. 4-5. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frames 0236-0237.

life.<sup>40</sup> What these profiles had in common was their emphasis on the oppositional tendencies of the African American people. SNCC did not only highlight how these African Americans contributed to American life but also how they challenged discrimination. The portraits helped to establish a centuries-long tradition of opposition within the African American community – one that SNCC intended to re-energise. SNCC’s curriculum used the work of Baldwin, Ellison and Richard Wright to establish the genius of African American letters and provide a new canon for black students that acknowledged their own heritage. Works by white writers such as Guy Carawan’s collection of freedom songs, *We Shall Overcome*, and W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* were studied alongside Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Strength To Love* and *Stride Toward Freedom*, and *Negroes With Guns* by Robert F. Williams.<sup>41</sup>

In June, SNCC activists Sam Block and Willie Peacock were arrested in Columbus, Mississippi on a traffic charge. A search of their vehicle revealed thousands of copies of Williams’ periodical *The Crusader*. Greenwood’s mayor concluded that Block and Peacock were distributing the periodical in the state, ‘absolute’ proof – for him – that the 1964 Summer Project was part of an international Communist plot.<sup>42</sup> That Block and Peacock were carrying so many copies of *The Crusader* and the existence of *Negroes With Guns* in the curriculum suggests that SNCC acknowledged Williams’ stance and that the Summer Project was exposing Mississippi blacks to African American militancy. Williams’ rugged politics provided a useful counterpoint to King’s faith in nonviolent direct action. His account of black resistance in Monroe related more directly to the experience of many Mississippian blacks who carried guns for their own

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<sup>40</sup> See profiles in SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frames 0822-0829.

<sup>41</sup> Anon, ‘Books Needed in the Mississippi Freedom Schools and Libraries’ n.d. SNCC reel 38 frame 1266. ‘Books for Mississippi Libraries’ features a list of over 100 books that SNCC wanted to be in freedom school libraries. See also list of history texts in Council of Federated Organizations, Panola County papers, SHSW box 1 folder 7. Hereafter cited as COFO-Panola Co.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) p. 290. Williams estimates that, at its peak, *The Crusader* had a print run of 40,000 copies, with reproductions boosting the figure in the United States. Robert F. Williams, interview with Robert C. Cohen p. 623. Robert C. Cohen papers, SHSW box 1 folder 9. Amiri Baraka mentions it reaching New York City during 1964. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, revised edition 1997) p. 289.

protection than to King's appeals to their Gandhian and Christian faiths. It was also interesting reading for the SNCC devotees of nonviolence who might not have experienced the brutality of small-town or rural life in the South and the necessary adjustments that black Mississippians made to nonviolence. As such, Williams' work provided a political framework around which activists could incorporate ideas about self-defence within the movement. Williams, still exiled in Cuba, was also discussed in SNCC staff meetings at this time, illustrating that his ideas were spreading through the organisation.<sup>43</sup> His message was being heard loud and clear in Mississippi. Throughout 1964, he continued to mix political comment and music – including the freedom songs – in *Radio Free Dixie*, introducing a song by Nina Simone with the words, 'the name of this tune is "Mississippi Goddamn," and I mean every word of it.'<sup>44</sup>

In selecting its study material, SNCC attempted to address two issues: the lack of African American visibility in American life and the racially polarised depiction of black and American history. Here, two important strands in SNCC philosophy combined – black nationalism and integrationism. SNCC noted that 'black' history was often isolated from American history. Thus a separate and unequal view of history was relayed to young generations. The task of the freedom schools, therefore, was not only to explore black history in itself but also to desegregate the history of nations by emphasising multiracial and international history. Ira Landess, a white teacher and freedom school co-ordinator in McComb, became fully aware of this during his summer. He expressed his worry that the black history curriculum was somehow flawed due to the fact that 'the Negro has suffered a history of deprivation and ostracism.' For Landess, 'such a hard fact grates upon [African American] ears... "Look how bad off we are!" – how many times a day can someone contemplate such a thought?'<sup>45</sup> The solution, Landess thought, reflecting the view of many curriculum planners, was to

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<sup>43</sup> Transcript of SNCC Staff meeting, 9-11 June 1964 p. 15. ZP box 2 folder 7. Payne, *I've Got* pp. 204-205 for SNCC reactions to gun ownership among Mississippi blacks.

<sup>44</sup> Transcript of *Radio Free Dixie* broadcast, 7 August 1964 pp. 2, 9. 'Radio Free Dixie' file, Johns Committee papers, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, series 1486, carton 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ira Landess, 'Freedom School Report: McComb' p. 1. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frame 0486.

integrate black history with white history and with the broader curriculum, in order to balance the negative black experience with the positive. Thus African history would not focus exclusively on the impact of white settlers and colonialism, but would encompass tribal society and African culture. The negative experience of slavery would not be separated from the concept that slavery inadvertently led to the development of a unique African American culture and the contribution of whites would not be written out of the history of the civil rights movement. At Holly Springs, for example, a discussion of the history of Haiti involved both the involvement of France in abolishing slavery during the French Revolution and the subsequent Haitian defeat of the English, the reinstating of slavery under Napoleon and the final creation of an independent Haiti before a comparison with the African American struggle for freedom.<sup>46</sup> Thus, while the black nationalist impulse led SNCC towards black history, its integrationism maintained that black history not be ghettoised. Pam Parker, of the Holly Springs school, was astonished at the reaction of her students to the history course. Their thirst for education, ‘drain me of everything that I have to offer.’<sup>47</sup> Parker rhapsodised that ‘every class is beautiful. The girls [two of them were mothers in their twenties] respond, respond, respond. And they disagree among themselves. I have no doubt that soon they will be disagreeing with me.’ She also tried (gracefully of course) to challenge her students’ blind faith in Christianity and dreamed that they could continue to learn even after her departure. Her nauseating romanticism suggests that Alice Walker’s Lynne was not simply a literary construct.<sup>48</sup>

SNCC also devised an arts and crafts programme for the freedom schools. In addition to the expected focus on the development of manual and design skills, the curriculum focused on the application of such skills to everyday life. Thus woodworking skills were directed towards the construction of household objects such as

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<sup>46</sup> Pam Parker, ‘Freedom School Report’ 18 July 1964 p. 2. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frame 0433.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* p. 1. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frame 0432.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* pp. 3-4. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frames 0433-0434. For Lynne, Alice Walker, *Meridian* (London: Women’s Press, 1976) pp. 127-129. Luckily, Parker did not suffer the same fate. Incidentally, Walker studied under Staughton Lynd at Spelman College. Staughton Lynd, introduction to Lynd, *Living* p. 15.

tables, benches and bookcases, with the intention of encouraging the students to use their income more effectively by making what they would normally buy. Zoya Zeman, a COFO volunteer in Clarksdale, felt that this section of the curriculum could become a basic element of a COFO-inspired vocational training project.<sup>49</sup> This small item in the curriculum hints at the lasting influence of Booker T. Washington on black activism. Few SNCC activists would have admitted the value of Washington's advocacy of agricultural and vocational training as the key to the solution of the southern race problem. However, the focus on manual labour and the production of low-cost utilitarian objects that could be used to increase the self-sufficiency of the black working class suggests that Washington's legacy endured and that a conservative streak remained in the Summer Project ethos.

The graphics workshops of the arts and crafts programme were geared towards developing awareness of 'communications of community importance' alongside the intrinsic value of the printed or reproduced matter.<sup>50</sup> Students were instructed in the operation of mimeograph machines in order that they could mass-produce leaflets for the community. Similarly, the visual art component focused on the social and cultural role of art. Students would discuss the role of African American art and compare it with African art, providing for an implicit critique of American society and emphasising the relationship between art and the society around it. The freedom schools would also be a forum for community art, where local people could display their art and discover how they could address it to their political and social experience. As a result of observing the students during creative subjects, Liz Fusco came to the realisation that expressing oneself in cultural forms was a crucial element of freedom. Thus social and cultural action could be united in striving for a common goal, in the process benefiting and strengthening each other.<sup>51</sup> One of the primary concerns of the curriculum was the

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<sup>49</sup> Zoya Zeman, 'Clarksdale Community Center' report, 7 September 1964 p. 1. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0374.

<sup>50</sup> 'SNCC Freedom Schools Art Curriculum' p. 2. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 1168.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* pp. 1-2. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frames 1167-1168.

relation of the artist to his or her surroundings. The curriculum suggested that teachers raise questions such as whether social guilt could cripple artistic creativity, the relationship between art and propaganda (and whether the latter can negate the former), the legitimacy of art as social protest, and whether there is a connection between suffering and creativity.<sup>52</sup> All of these questions raise the issue of the role of culture in society and make it clear that SNCC viewed culture, in its many forms, as a crucial battleground for the hearts and minds of black America.

Influenced by the citizenship schools and perhaps Booker T. Washington, SNCC used pedagogic techniques that emphasised the everyday application of academic disciplines. Thus economics could be presented as the effects on the individual of a loan and the individual's responsibilities thereof. Staughton Lynd was keen that SNCC give its curriculum a Socratic air, to provoke and stimulate its young students who had previously been prevented from questioning anything.<sup>53</sup> Lynd had already put his beliefs into practice after resigning from the faculty at Spelman College, Atlanta over restrictions on the academic freedom of staff and students before designing the freedom school curriculum.<sup>54</sup> With such methods and a more creative attitude towards teaching, SNCC hoped that black Mississippians would rediscover a thirst for learning and an appreciation of their own talents, thus spurring them on to further individual and group development. As a SNCC report noted,

we feel that such a curriculum will result in a creative experience for both the students and the teachers. It is hoped that both will come away with a new awareness of themselves and the movement. Perhaps, the children will be able to develop a new way of thinking... In short we feel that the Freedom

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<sup>52</sup> 'Negro History Curriculum' chapter 8 – 'The Negro in Culture, Art and Literature' p. 4. COFO-Panola Co. box 1 folder 7.

<sup>53</sup> See Lois Chaffee letter to Barbara Jones, 26 April 1964. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0255.

<sup>54</sup> Staughton Lynd, 'Freedom Summer: A Tragedy, Not a Melodrama' in Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) p. 31-33.



Schools can accomplish the vital task of causing high school youth in Mississippi to QUESTION.<sup>55</sup>

This questioning developed from relatively simple issues such as ‘what is the freedom movement?’ and ‘why do the freedom schools exist?’ to issues such as the role of majoritarian culture, its relationship to minority groups and the development of oppositional culture in response to its deficiencies. Some classes even developed a critique of majoritarian language, comprising an early attempt at grasping the issue of the African American vernacular in the context of American education.<sup>56</sup>

To engender a greater sense of group loyalty, freedom school students were encouraged to express themselves through whatever means were at their disposal and in whichever way they felt most comfortable. In one of the Jackson freedom schools, a history teacher used a session to discuss that morning’s local newspaper editorial. He encouraged the students to consider how they would write a letter to the editor in response and the best two were posted to the newspaper. As Howard Zinn put it, ‘this was not education for grades... but for an immediate use.’<sup>57</sup> Students were encouraged to reject their forebears’ acceptance of, and even happiness with, the racial *status quo* and their own inferiority by contrasting such common misconceptions with the message, both symbolic and political, of the civil rights movement and their own involvement in the freedom schools. Encouraging the students to reverse the roles and exploring how this related to the American democratic ideal of every person being equal challenged the lessons that many students learned at home, such as never openly questioning the authority of whites. Through such questions, freedom school students would develop a greater ability to think critically and act according to their conscience.

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Report of a subgroup of the Leadership Development and Current Issues Committee at the Mississippi Summer Project Curriculum Conference’ 21-22 March 1964. SNCC reel 38 frame 1257. Emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup> Jane Stembridge, ‘Notes About a Class’ in Ethel N. Minor (ed.), *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Vintage, 1971) pp. 3-8. For an introduction to the linguistics of black English and a passionate defence of its legitimacy as an academic subject, see John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Howard Zinn, ‘Schools in Context: The Mississippi Idea’ SNCC pamphlet p. 5. Originally published in *The Nation* 23 November 1964. Linda Gordon papers, SHSW ‘SNCC, 1964-1965’ folder.

This change was crucial to SNCC's insistence that the culture of the South be changed. Students in Hattiesburg were inspired by their freedom schools to draft their own Declaration of Independence which began, 'in this course of human events, it has become necessary for the Negro people to break away from the customs which have made it very difficult for the Negro to get his God-given rights.'<sup>58</sup> Clearly aware of the linguistic skill of, and the exclusions contained within, the original Declaration, the students added African American vernacular to create a document in the spirit of American letters, with a flavour that derived from the excluded. Although it was a political document, its mere production suggests much about the creation of an oppositional culture within the freedom schools and how the students were beginning to translate this culture into their own lives. The students were encouraged to see the world outside their community and take from mainstream American culture what they thought was useful while challenging what they thought was unacceptable.

In October 1964, Myles Horton wrote to Liz Fusco in support of a plan to establish poetry corners in libraries throughout the South. Having witnessed the keenness of students to read and write poetry during the Summer Project, Fusco told Horton that she was anxious to expand the experience to other communities.<sup>59</sup> Fusco's own field of work was poetry and her enthusiasm for the subject filtered through all of the freedom schools. Students were encouraged to express themselves through whichever means they were most comfortable.<sup>60</sup> In Harmony, Mississippi, freedom school students were encouraged to read their poetry out loud in order to stimulate discussion. Ida Ruth Griffin read her poem in which she referred to herself (and by implication all Mississippi blacks) as a slave. This led to howling protests from much of

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<sup>58</sup> Freedom school students of Hattiesburg, 'Declaration of Independence.' ZP box 2 folder 2.

<sup>59</sup> Myles Horton, letter to Liz Fusco 21 October 1964; Fusco, letter to Horton, 25 October 1964. HREC box 9 folder 23. Staughton Lynd also recalls the popularity of poetry classes, Lynd, 'Freedom Summer' p. 33.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Lillie Mae Powell, 'The Negro Soldier' in Zinn, 'Schools in Context' p. 5.

her class and developed into an intense discussion over the validity of her statement.<sup>61</sup> Members of the Holly Springs freedom school were encouraged to publish their own newspaper in which students wrote poetry and articles about their hopes and fears. Arelya J. Mitchell wrote a eulogy to John F. Kennedy that reflected the southern black affection for the former President and spoke of his assassination as ‘the date we’ll never forget!’<sup>62</sup> Similarly Mae Alice Matthews, from Benton County, wrote about Kennedy, drawing the conclusion that African Americans should learn from and build on Kennedy’s sacrifice. Her sorrow at the death of the President was channelled through her conviction – encouraged by SNCC – that the past should be used as a motivational force:

Do not count the tales of yesterday,  
And the things you left undone.  
Let’s look to the future  
When voting day shall come!<sup>63</sup>

Most of the freedom school poetry utilised social realism and reflected the Summer Project philosophy of introducing complex or abstract subjects through examples from students’ everyday lives. Potential poets were encouraged to write about what they knew, in order that universal truths might be revealed through individual experience. Thus in Mitchell’s and Matthews’ poems, the feelings of the individual could be extrapolated to the African American population at large. Beulah Mae Ayers also used her personal experience as a metaphor, writing about her experience of teachers being afraid to teach and of a Sister Throp, who stood up to this obsequiousness and inspired hundreds of women to learn. Mrs Ayers then linked this experience to the wider issue of black women hiding from their reality, scared to show their face, and warned them that:

When God gets ready for you,

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<sup>61</sup> Holt, *Summer* pp. 109-111. Intriguingly, this poem was reprinted in the SCLC’s newsletter in 1968. *Soul Force* 15 February 1968 p. 7. SHSW microfilm, no frame numbers.

<sup>62</sup> Arelya J. Mitchell, ‘Nov. 22, 1963’ in *The Freedom News* 1,2 (10 July 1964) p. 1. ZP box 2 folder 2.

<sup>63</sup> Mae Alice Matthews, ‘President Kennedy’ *Benton County Freedom Train* 1,2 (28 July 1964) p. 3. ZP box 2 folder 2.

There'll be no hiding place.<sup>64</sup>

Mrs Ayers' work was influenced by her Christianity and has rhetorical echoes of Fannie Lou Hamer's oratory. The duty of oppressed people to resist was a key theme for both.

The promise of freedom loomed large in the freedom school poetry, alongside the Christianity that formed the backbone of southern black society and the social realism encouraged by the freedom school teachers. Langston Hughes' poetry was also a point of reference for a number of students. A Gluckstadt freedom school teacher excitedly reported that one of her male students borrowed a Langston Hughes collection and managed to interest his friends in the poetry, so much so that they read it aloud during a session.<sup>65</sup> The selection of Hughes as a text for, and his popularity with, freedom school students is unsurprising. His simple lyricism and accessible form endears his poetry to any reader and would have encouraged freedom school students to enter the world of poetry. Poems such as the Whitman-esque 'I, Too' illustrate the double consciousness of the African American and the isolation tinged with optimism that characterised the African American experience:

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen"  
Then.

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<sup>64</sup> Beulah Mae Ayers, 'What a Woman Can Do' *Benton County Freedom Train* 1,2 (28 July 1964) p. 3. ZP box 2 folder 2.

<sup>65</sup> Anon teacher, 'Gluckstadt Freedom School' c. July 1964 p. 2. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0240.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst the poem contains a less confident view of the African American, it reflects the concerns of the Summer Project. SNCC's political aim was to stop white America refusing to seat African Americans at the democratic table. The Summer Project also aimed to legitimise black culture, thus raising the level of self-awareness and pride in the African American community. These two processes would induce shame in white America at its rejection of black America. Then, just as Hughes' subject receives his due, African Americans, too, will become accepted as Americans.

Hughes' poetry was firmly grounded in the Blues, both in form and content. In works such as 'Homesick Blues' and 'Bound No'th Blues,' Hughes' poetry referred to the theme of travel (often northwards) which resonated with many freedom school students.<sup>67</sup> He was firmly located within the organic African American folk tradition, a poet whose work could translate easily from the Harlem Renaissance to the freedom schools of Mississippi.<sup>68</sup> Hughes influenced the more impressionistic poetry of the Summer Project. Etta Forbes used a Blues-styled poem to explain her desire to be a gypsy. Although again rooted in social realism the gypsy life represents both realism and metaphor:

A gypsy, a gypsy  
To ramble, and to roam,  
For maybe,

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<sup>66</sup> Langston Hughes, 'I, Too' Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (London: Pluto Press, 1986) p. 275. The poem was originally published in *The Weary Blues* (1926).

<sup>67</sup> Edward E. Waldron, 'The Blues Poetry of Langston Hughes' *Negro American Literature Forum* 5,4 (winter 1971) p. 147; Arnold Rampersad, 'Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to The Jew' *Callaloo* 26 (winter 1986) p. 153. The poems were both published in *Fine Clothes to The Jew* (1927). Len Holt notes the use of Hughes' poem 'Blues' as a teaching text. Holt, *Summer* p. 109. See also Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' Donald P. Gibson, *Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes, and LeRoi Jones* (New York: New York University Press, 1970) p. 227. Originally published in *The Nation* 122 (1926).

<sup>68</sup> Muhammad Ali's opinion of Hughes' poetry exemplifies its universal appeal: 'his were the kind of poems I liked, straight, simple, and at least half of them were in rhyme.' Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (St. Albans: Mayflower, 1976) p. 96.

For a week or so,  
And then go hiding home.<sup>69</sup>

Mrs Forbes explores her relationship with her home and her desire for freedom, suggesting both the desire for political and social freedom and the need to retain her roots in her Mississippi community. Other poets also developed metaphorical techniques: Naomi Long Nadget took Christian themes to illustrate the force behind the freedom movement:

I've seen daylight breaking high above the bough,  
I've found my destination and I've made my vow:  
So whether you abhor me or deride me or ignore me,  
Mighty mountains loom be-ore me, [*sic*]  
And I won't stop now.<sup>70</sup>

It would be overstating the case to argue that all the poetry from the freedom schools derived from a reading of Langston Hughes. However, the themes within his work were of universal appeal to the African American population. It is not surprising that his work was a reference point for the budding poets of 1964. The links between the poetry of Hughes and the students – with a central theme being the relationship between the mundane and the transcendental – suggests that the shared memory of slavery and its aftermath loomed large in the African American mind.

Highlander assisted in the development of the freedom school curriculum, hosting a COFO conference in March 1964 at which the curriculum was discussed.<sup>71</sup> Its influence also extended to the Mississippi Caravan of Music that toured the state as part of the Summer Project. Sponsored by the New York Council of Performing Artists, the Caravan involved over 25 singers and musicians in performing and leading workshops in movement meeting centres. Singers such as Len Chandler, Peter, Paul and Mary, the Staple Singers, Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan all helped to spread folk culture through the state. SNCC's Freedom Singers also performed and led workshops. The Caravan

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<sup>69</sup> Etta Forbes, 'A Gypsy' *The Pratt Freedom Press* 1,1 (21 August 1964) p. 4. ZP box 2 folder 2.

<sup>70</sup> Naomi Long Nadget, untitled poem written at a freedom school reprinted in *Radical Teacher* 40 (Fall 1991) p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> See various documents in HREC box 41 folder 6.

delved into African American history to establish the close relationship between black protest and black culture, as exemplified in the slave songs and the freedom songs.<sup>72</sup> During Seeger's visit to Jackson, he talked of the power of music to transcend racial and cultural divides, singing Indian, Chinese and Polynesian songs that he had learned during his travels. He also taught the schoolchildren songs in African languages, thus linking the students once more to their heritage.<sup>73</sup> The Caravan provided a vital new cultural arena for black Mississippians. The music workshops and hootenannies successfully introduced local people to new and old forms of music from both the white and the African American folk traditions, and ensured that the traditions spread further through the people.<sup>74</sup> For Julius Lester, Freedom Summer was also a journey of self-discovery. His official remit was to perform freedom songs and hold workshops on black music, but he also felt that Mississippi was an opportunity to 'learn and to be born again... to see my family's beginning in this country... to be freed from slavery and feel the confusion and joy that emancipation brought.'<sup>75</sup>

## **The Free Southern Theater**

Theatre played an important role in the freedom schools. Role play was often used to illustrate many issues and encourage group bonding. The students at Holly Springs wrote and performed a play based on the life of Medgar Evers during the summer.<sup>76</sup> Sandy Siegel reported that some of the Clarksdale students were planning a production

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<sup>72</sup> Mississippi Summer Project Fact Sheet, 1 August 1964 p. 2. ZP, box 2 folder 2. Bob Cohen, 'The Mississippi Caravan of Music' *Broadside* article (undated). Highlander Research and Education Center records, University of Nottingham microfilm reel 35 frame 0960. See also 'Freedom School Data' p. 5. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0210.

<sup>73</sup> Florence Howe, 'Mississippi's Freedom Schools' pp. 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> Holt, *Summer* pp. 84-85.

<sup>75</sup> Julius Lester, *Search for the New Land: History as Subjective Experience* (London: Allison & Busby, 1971) p. 69.

<sup>76</sup> 'Seeds Of Freedom' cast list. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frame 0436. The cast later travelled to New York City to perform the play. SNCC Press Release 'Miss. "Freedom School" Players to Act in NY' n.d. SNCC reel 37 frame 0601.

of *Blues For Mister Charlie* in addition to their regular studies. This was prior to the arrival of the Free Southern Theater (FST).<sup>77</sup>

Of the cultural events and programmes in the Summer Project, the FST's tour was easily the most significant and successful. Black SNCC activists John O'Neal and Doris Derby, and journalist Gilbert Moses were instrumental in the establishment of this theatre group that aligned itself with the civil rights struggle. The FST toured Mississippi during the Summer Project, bringing theatre and drama workshops to the black community in an attempt to broaden the struggle into the cultural sphere. Its founders believed that there was a cultural void in the black community that could be filled by live drama. The FST hoped that 'the success of the program will enable expansion... to include all levels of community participation not only in the dramatic art but also in the art forms associated with drama – music, dance, and painting.'<sup>78</sup> For O'Neal, protest and political action could not sufficiently transform the South.<sup>79</sup> The FST's work would be the catalyst for further community development and confidence. The community would become involved in cultural activities alongside politically oriented actions and thus the work of the civil rights movement would expand into the cultural sphere.

O'Neal, a psychology and philosophy student at Southern Illinois University, left his studies to join SNCC in 1962. He became influenced by Charles Sherrod's missionary zeal in south-west Georgia and took a similar enthusiasm and single-mindedness with him to Mississippi, where he helped to plan the 1964 Summer Project. Doris Derby, an artist, dancer and elementary school teacher from New York City, travelled to the South to become part of the Albany movement in 1962. Gil Moses studied at Oberlin College before joining the staff of the *Mississippi Free Press*. Derby

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<sup>77</sup> Sandy Siegel, 'Clarksdale Freedom School' report, 17 July 1964. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0372. The FST was due to visit Clarksdale on 18 August.

<sup>78</sup> Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses and John O'Neal, 'The Need For A Southern Freedom Theatre' *Freedomways* 4,1 (first quarter 1964) p. 111.

<sup>79</sup> John O'Neal quoted in Stuart W. Little, 'Fulfilling a Deep Need in the Deep South' *New York Herald Tribune* 16 August 1964 p. 29. Samuel Walker papers, SHSW box 1 folder 11.



and O'Neal later joined SNCC's literacy project at Tougaloo College in Jackson, where they began to develop the idea of the FST.<sup>80</sup> All three became convinced that a cultural approach to SNCC's organising in the South would be a viable addition to the movement. A SNCC press release announced the establishment of the FST by the three in April 1964. Richard Schechner, a white drama professor from Tulane University and editor of the *Tulane Drama Review*, joined the company soon after.<sup>81</sup>

The FST founders asserted that their initial aims were to develop a drama group in Tougaloo College that was to be composed of students and both professional and amateur actors. As a result of their movement experiences, the actors intended the nascent FST to focus on producing plays that explored issues pertinent to 'the Negro in problematic situations,' and felt it important to use works by black playwrights.<sup>82</sup> However, they were aware that the development of black theatre had been sorely limited by the closed society and so prepared to produce their own work. 'In order to develop a dramatic style which can best bring out the unique experience of the Southern Negro,' they asserted, 'and so that a versatile group able to serve the repertory nature of the proposed theater can be developed, improvisation experimentation is the emphasis of the group's activity.'<sup>83</sup> Such a technique placed the FST within the African American improvisational tradition and gave notice that the actors were convinced that truth within a performance came from the people themselves, rather than from liberal playwrights. However, a tension remained in the practical relationship between the FST and the improvisational tradition.

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<sup>80</sup> Derby biographical detail from Clarissa Myrick Harris, 'Mirror of the movement: The history of the Free Southern Theater as a microcosm of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements 1963-1978' (PhD thesis, Emory University, 1988) pp. 12-13. O'Neal and Moses biographical detail from Little, 'Fulfilling' p. 29; Zinn, *SNCC* p. 103.

<sup>81</sup> SNCC press release, 10 April 1964. SAVF, SHSW box 19; John O'Neal, 'At the Heart of the Matter in Jackson,' c. March or April 1964 p. 1. The Free Southern Theater Records, 1963-1978, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University microfilm reel 2 box 6 folder 12. Hereafter cited as FST.

<sup>82</sup> Derby et al 'The Need For' p. 111.

<sup>83</sup> Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, John O'Neal, William Hutchinson, 'A General Prospectus For The Establishment Of A Free Southern Theater' SCLC part 4 reel 5 frame 0647.

Following its initial plan, the FST explored works by Lorraine Hansberry, Ossie Davis and Langston Hughes in order to produce a black play for the summer tour. After failing to develop a workable production, the FST also failed to devise an improvisational piece before choosing to present Martin Duberman's *In White America* during its first tour. Duberman, a white Princeton University historian and sociologist, had recently won a Bancroft prize for a biography of Charles Francis Adams. *In White America* was his first published play. *In White America* was influenced by the concept of a usable past and developed out of Duberman's interest in the civil rights movement, New Left politics and history. As he wrote in the preface, 'I wanted to combine the evocative power of the spoken word with the confirming power of historical fact... [so that] past reality might enter into present consciousness.'<sup>84</sup> Since it was written by a white man in the European theatrical tradition, Clarissa Myrick Harris suggests that the selection of this play indicates the suffocating bind of double consciousness on the FST and, in particular, on Moses and O'Neal.<sup>85</sup> However, if studied within the context of the Summer Project – which O'Neal helped to create – its selection makes more sense. Although plays by Hansberry, Davis and Hughes would have been more 'black,' none of the plots integrated with the Summer Project's aim of exposing universal truths through personal experience. The selection of *In White America* also suggests that the FST was committed to integration and was not yet concerned about the symbolism of presenting a 'white' play. Duberman's play traced African American history from the colonial period until the 1950s and, as such, perfectly complemented the history curriculum of the Project. Its accessible dialogue and documentary feel rendered it palatable to a wide audience and the play delved into significant events in African American history, exploring the issue of what it meant to be black in white America. It

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<sup>84</sup> Martin B. Duberman, *In White America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964) p. x. Duberman instructed his publisher to send 25 free copies to Mississippi. Duberman letter to Lynd, Carolyn Amussen (Houghton Mifflin) to Lynd, both 8 July 1964. FST reel 17 box 54 folder 10. For Duberman and the New Left, Martin Duberman, 'The Abolitionists and Psychology' *Journal of Negro History* 47 (1962) pp. 183-191; Jonathan M. Wiener, 'Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980' *Journal of American History* 76 (1989) p. 413.

<sup>85</sup> Harris, 'Mirror' p. 27.

also illustrates that the FST was influenced by Lynd's conception of a usable past. As Gil Moses notes, 'we picked it because its theme essentially stated that the Negro revolt was like the American Revolution,' just as New Left history suggested that the New Left had deep roots in American dissent.<sup>86</sup> Rather than illustrating the burden of double consciousness, *In White America* instead emphasises the pragmatism of the FST and its keenness to ensure that its work contained an accessible, yet pertinent political message.

The play uses primary sources including Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, letters between a slave mistress and her ex-slave in the antebellum period, excerpts from speeches in Congress and the Works Progress Administration slave narratives as an historical backdrop with dialogue constructed around the original documents.<sup>87</sup> Opening with a brief scene set in January 1964, the play examines the black experience in the United States through, '400 years of barbaric treatment,' concluding with the 1957 Little Rock crisis.<sup>88</sup> Gil Moses, however, felt that the play stopped too suddenly.<sup>89</sup> Recent events in Mississippi provided a provocative and emotive conclusion to the play, so he added two scenes centred on the murder of COFO workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner. Moses also interspersed the play with freedom songs, thus linking African American history and culture in an even more explicit manner. Each performance was accompanied by a workshop in the local freedom school on the same day, in which the FST introduced students to theatre participation. With this in mind, the FST's tour was explicitly conceived as an addition to the Summer Project curriculum, giving further credence to the argument that *In White America* was the most appropriate play for the FST to present.

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<sup>86</sup> Gilbert Moses, John O'Neal, Denise Nicholas, Murray Levy, Richard Schechner, 'Dialog: The Free Southern Theatre' (1965) in Annemarie Bean (ed.), *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 106. For New Left interpretations of dissent in American history see, for example, Barton J. Bernstein (ed.), *Towards A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

<sup>87</sup> Duberman, *In White* pp. 15-18, 83-112.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.* pp. 4-81, quote p. 4. Duberman chose not to extend the narrative to link up with his opening scene because he felt that the subsequent events were sufficiently familiar to his audience and that Little Rock was difficult to better dramatically.

<sup>89</sup> Gilbert Moses, 'Notes on *In White America*' 11 July 1964 p. 2. FST reel 17 box 54 folder 10.

The production of *In White America* that toured Mississippi during the Summer Project was an undoubted success, despite the fact that, as actor Eric Weinberger recalls, 'it was difficult to act thinking a shot could ring out at any moment.'<sup>90</sup> The FST performed throughout Mississippi for three weeks with a cast drawn from the ranks of Summer Project staff and volunteers. It played for church congregations, school children, civil rights workers and the community at large. Clearly, the play had to be comprehensible to a largely ill-educated and culturally unaware audience. To criticise the FST, as Clarissa Myrick Harris has, over the choice of a white play aimed at a sympathetic yet generally uninformed audience, ignores the historical reality of white Mississippi's refusal to educate its black populace and to overemphasise and romanticise the cultural bonds that link black America, whilst simultaneously advocating a racially essentialist argument.<sup>91</sup> *In White America* told the story that the FST wanted its audience to hear and become involved in, regardless of its author's race.

Performances began with John O'Neal impressing on the audience that, 'you are the actors,' thus making explicit the relationship between the play and African American life, emphasising the FST's belief that the seeds of change took root in the black community and that ordinary people were also history makers. Famously, during the performance in Greenwood, one member of the audience took O'Neal's opening statement literally, and joined the actors on stage, who worked around him until he left the performance following some prompting from Moses.<sup>92</sup> Although it desired to break down the traditional barriers that existed between performers and audience, the FST was rarely able to translate its interaction with the community into the performance sphere. Its choice of material played no small part in this, particularly in the case of *In White*

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<sup>90</sup> Eric Weinberger quoted in Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1988) p. 386. Weinberger was a white former member of New York's Living Theater who joined the FST for the 1964 summer tour.

<sup>91</sup> Harris, 'Mirror' pp. 24-25, 27-29.

<sup>92</sup> For references to this event, see Genevieve Fabre, 'The Free Southern Theatre, 1963-1979' *Black American Literature Forum* 17, 2 (summer 1983) p. 55; Elizabeth Sutherland, 'Theater of the Meaningful' *The Nation* 19 October 1964 in Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner, Gilbert Moses (eds.), *The Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) p. 29.

*America*, where the inexperienced company felt that to alter the story would be to alter history. This tension between accuracy and improvisation remained with the FST throughout its life.

Movement historiography has underestimated the significance of the FST's first tour.<sup>93</sup> In fact, the FST's Summer Project tour was one of the most significant events of the summer. A SNCC document on the plans for the 1964 Summer Project denotes the FST tour as one of the three most important of the planned events for that summer – the others being the freedom school conference and the freedom schools themselves.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, Staughton Lynd expressed his conviction that the work of the FST was to drama what the freedom schools were to education – revolutionary in its conception of student (or audience) participation.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, *In White America's* use of history conformed with Lynd's belief in the concept of a usable past. Sally Belfrage states that the Greenwood performance was 'the most exciting theater I had ever seen.'<sup>96</sup> Kirsty Powell, a freedom school co-ordinator in Ruleville hailed the FST's performance as 'a great success.' According to Powell, 'the [200-strong] audience almost became a part of the play... there was an intimacy and informality about the performance that underlined for me the impression that the play was woven out of the very stuff of these people's lives.'<sup>97</sup> Florence Howe describes the theatre as the best of COFO's cultural activities. She also recalls that the audience consisted mostly of students who had never before seen live theatre, let alone a play about their own history. 'Their response as audience,'

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<sup>93</sup> Clayborne Carson condenses the history of the FST to two sentences in his history of SNCC, suggesting that the FST had little impact on the 1964 Summer Project. Cagin and Dray make only a fleeting reference to the FST. Doug McAdam, Nicolaus Mills and Howard Zinn ignore the FST. Even John Dittmer and Charles Payne give the FST short shrift: Dittmer mentions the FST only once and Payne neglects to mention the FST at all. Carson, *In Struggle* p. 120; Cagin and Dray, *We Are* p. 386; McAdam, *Freedom*; Mills, *Like*; Zinn, *SNCC*; Dittmer, *Local* p. 261; Payne, *I've Got*.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, untitled document, July 1964 p. 3. ZP box 2 folder 2. See fn. 11 above ('layout of the Zinn papers') for evidence that suggests the author of this document was Staughton Lynd.

<sup>95</sup> Lynd cited in 'Freedom School Data' p. 4. SNCC-MFDP reel 67 frame 0209.

<sup>96</sup> Belfrage, *Freedom* p. 232. See also Holt, *Summer* p. 83; David Gelford, letter to 'people' 11 August 1964 p. 1. ESP, reel 1 frame 0208.

<sup>97</sup> Kirsty Powell, 'Report Mainly on Ruleville Freedom School, Summer Project, 1964' pp. 9-10. SNCC-MFDP reel 68 frame 0586.

she notes, 'was continuously energetic, especially since, as they reported the next day, they enjoyed recognizing incidents they had been reading of or discussing.'<sup>98</sup> Most audiences understood that they were learning while being entertained. However, Stuart Little quotes an anonymous black Mississippian arguing that, 'the theater is a wonderful idea. It takes more than learning to make the whole man.'<sup>99</sup> Whilst this might suggest that some considered *In White America* to be mere entertainment, it also indicates that audiences were primarily engaging with the theatre as a cultural activity, that the FST was stealthily educating while entertaining and that the FST was broadening the scope of the Summer Project.

Whites descended on the performance at Indianola, in Sunflower County, including 42 armed police and a deputised posse, suggesting that the popularity and, perhaps, notoriety of the play had spread to the white community. The arrival of the whites led to fervent renditions of freedom songs from the black audience, including a pointed 'Which Side Are You On?'.<sup>100</sup> During the performance at a Gulfport cinema, the audience, used to a diet of chase scenes, gun play and masses of corpses, grew impatient and began heckling the FST, much to the chagrin of Gil Moses.<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Sutherland observed that some of the irony and humour was lost on much of the audience. In contrast to Sutherland though, one COFO worker asserted that 'every single bit of humor in the play is caught.'<sup>102</sup> Greenwood locals, in addition to the improviser, were enraptured by the FST's work and some became even more vociferous in their support for the movement after witnessing *In White America*.<sup>103</sup> A native Mississippian, after witnessing the power of the FST's production told Len Holt,

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<sup>98</sup> Howe, 'Mississippi's Freedom Schools' p. 8

<sup>99</sup> Anonymous 'Mississippi Negro' quoted in Little, 'Fulfilling' p. 29

<sup>100</sup> Erika [Teer of SNCC] letter to Joy, 19 August 1964. FST reel 17 box 54 folder 10; Sutherland, 'Theater' p. 28, in which the Sunflower County Clerk asserts that the play only served to confirm that the entire Summer Project was 'Communist-infiltrated.'

<sup>101</sup> Sutherland, 'Theater' p. 25. Moses was 'furious' at the audience's noise. Moses *et al*, 'Dialog' p. 112.

<sup>102</sup> Anonymous white COFO worker quoted in Little, 'Fulfilling' p. 29.

<sup>103</sup> Belfrage, *Freedom* p. 232.

I sat there on the edge of the seat, with one hand holding me to it, to keep from jumping up and screaming through the veil of heaven, "Yes! Tell it!" With the other hand, I was wiping tears from my eyes that were laden with love, sorrow, joy, pity – and hate... They were telling my story on that stage. Oh, they were telling it... and telling it like it *really* is.<sup>104</sup>

These testimonies indicate that the FST had a profound impact on the 1964 Summer Project, and on the thousands of Mississippians who witnessed the FST's performances. Its work was integral to the Project, illuminating the work of the history curriculum and giving added impetus to the students' studies. Although some of the reactions were not necessarily what the FST intended, as a composite, these testimonies prove that *In White America* had succeeded in provoking its audience. While some Mississippians focused on what it said about white people, others found it to be a superlative examination of what it meant to be black. For some it told a story, while for others, it presented a documentary. It challenged the preconceptions of its audiences and, although for some it did so in the wrong way, it convinced others to rededicate themselves to the civil rights movement. It is without doubt that the FST tour resulted in the cultural enrichment of the Mississippians who witnessed it. Although it is unclear how many people were inspired by the FST to enter into theatre, its tour remained as a powerful memory of summer 1964 and illustrated that protest could come in many forms and move the individual in many ways.

### **CORE and the Summer Project**

At the beginning of 1964, CORE was still convinced that voter registration was the key to success in the South.<sup>105</sup> Even in the Meridian, Mississippi freedom school and community centre, part of the COFO operation in Mississippi that was run by CORE, the organisation emphasised the political aspects of the work. Once again it asserted that the heart of its programme in the South was its 'conviction that political strength is the

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<sup>104</sup> Anonymous Mississippian quoted in Holt, *Summer* p. 83. Emphasis in original.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Mike Lesser, 'Field Report: Oachita Parish' 9-12 December 1963 p. 4. CORE – Monroe, Louisiana chapter box 3 folder 2. Hereafter cited as CORE-Monroe.

key to equal opportunity.<sup>106</sup> Rather than acknowledging the cultural impact of the freedom schools and the community centres, CORE saw in them the potential for greater political involvement in the community. Staff member Eric Morton suggested that the simple fact that the project involved itself in the community, 'gives the local people the incentive and courage to continue their opposition. People are more willing to work with and suffer for a cause which will follow-up in the wake of the activities it encourages rather than one which agitates and then walks out of the situation.'<sup>107</sup> Although Dave Dennis' conception of the freedom schools was closer to SNCC's, when discussing them with CORE hierarchy, he concurred with Morton's interpretation, stating that their primary purpose would be 'where action orientated Mississippi high school students *will be trained on political issues*.'<sup>108</sup> So, for CORE, the 1964 Summer Project represented a deeper political, rather than a deeper philosophical or cultural, commitment to ordinary African Americans. In contrast to SNCC's view, education might produce a free thinker, but might not produce a CORE activist or member. Where SNCC was less concerned with constructing its own power base (although it did so through the commitment of its staff and volunteers) and felt that educated people would naturally conclude that they should register to vote, CORE saw educational programmes as a potential propaganda vehicle to boost its membership rolls and lead people straight towards registration.

However, once again, CORE's lack of central control allowed individuals within the organisation to develop their own projects that did not necessarily reflect the central office's attitude toward cultural protest or cultural development. Dave Dennis was Assistant Program Director of COFO during 1964. His work in Canton, Mississippi, gradually convinced him that, although he accepted their role in the movement, he was

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<sup>106</sup> CORE Southern Office, 'Relation of Southern Program to National Program' September 1964 p. 1. Alan Gartner papers, SHSW box 1 folder 10. Hereafter cited as AGP.

<sup>107</sup> Eric Morton, memo to NAC c. September 1964. Records of the Congress of Racial Equality, SHSW series 5 box 22 folder 3. Hereafter cited as CORE.

<sup>108</sup> Minutes of NAC meeting, 21-23 February 1964 p. 4. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1. Emphasis added.



not interested in working with whites.<sup>109</sup> At the beginning of his involvement with CORE, Dennis conformed to the view that voter registration should be the base of all CORE's operations in the South.<sup>110</sup> His close association with SNCC influenced him to include projects such as freedom schools in CORE's Mississippi operation, which he thought could become the model for further southern organising by CORE.<sup>111</sup> Dennis' reasoning, though, is anomalous in the CORE records. Of all the proposals for action in the South put before CORE committees between 1960 and 1964, only his emphasise the benefits of a cultural focus to political organising, and even they focus primarily on political organising as the key to community development. That he worked so closely with SNCC during this period is no coincidence, and his growing suspicion of white involvement in the movement suggests that the Summer Project pushed some activists towards black nationalism.

Other CORE staff in Louisiana and Mississippi felt that the success of the 1964 Summer Project lay in its political ramifications. The lessons of the experiment in developing parallel structures were those that CORE people took to heart. Thus they suggested that CORE and, by extension, the movement as a whole had to infiltrate the American political structure, lest it find itself 'in the same political dilemma in 1968.'<sup>112</sup> Throughout this period CORE envisaged its southern operations to be centred on voter registration – in fact the only exception to this was Mississippi, in which the focus was to be freedom registration in SNCC's parallel and independent voting system. CORE's reasoning behind this lay in part in the Voter Education Project money that it accepted

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<sup>109</sup> Biographical details from Dave Dennis interview with Tom Dent, 8 October 1983. Mississippi Oral Histories, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University cassette #46; John O'Neal letter to James Farmer, 10 March 1964. CORE series 5 box 22 folder 3 features Dennis's name on the letterhead of COFO stationery.

<sup>110</sup> Dave Dennis, memo to Jim McCain, 'Mississippi in Motion' 19 October 1963. In this memo, Dennis bizarrely refers to CORE's duty in the South as 'to penetrate [t]his line of hatred and psychological prostitution with an unbending and leak-proof prophylactic of justice.' pp. 2-3. Floyd B. McKissick papers, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill folder 6955. Hereafter cited as McKP.

<sup>111</sup> Dave Dennis, memo to NAC members and CORE National Office, 21 September 1964. CORE series 5 box 22 folder 3.

<sup>112</sup> Mississippi and Louisiana staff, 'Proposed Plan of Action for CORE' c. November 1964 p. 2. CORE series 5 box 14 folder 10.

to run operations in Louisiana. Such money was granted on the proviso that the activities refrain from any explicit political work aside from voter registration. The education programmes that CORE involved itself in were all focused on political education. According to an internal document, there was ‘a clear consensus’ within CORE’s southern staff that these programmes were the key to the organisation’s success in the region and the key to developing a ‘psychology of equality.’<sup>113</sup> To suggest, then, that financial and external considerations hampered CORE’s involvement with freedom schools and cultural projects would be erroneous and further confirms that CORE was reliant on individual initiatives for its more holistic projects during this period.

Significantly, in the CORE freedom schools, SNCC’s curriculum was adapted to fit CORE’s ideas about the project. Thus classes were held in social sciences, languages, music and a course simply titled, ‘Freedom.’ This course was designed to help students in, ‘understanding the freedom movement and what it means to them and their relationship to their community.’<sup>114</sup> Although art and drama classes were available, emphasis was placed on the value of the Freedom course to the students, with the more abstract subjects secondary considerations. As for the community centres, however, CORE staff did not expect the popularity of cultural activities – the Meridian project director was rather surprised that the students actually enjoyed listening to The Beatles, Bach and Berlioz.<sup>115</sup>

When CORE did engage with the wider concerns of freedom schools, the subjects and materials used were heavily influenced by SNCC’s freedom school curriculum. The derivative curriculum followed the same format as SNCC’s, including

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<sup>113</sup> Richard Haley, ‘CORE in the South (Sept. to Dec. 1964)’ 28 January 1965 p. 1. AGP box 1 folder 14. For CORE’s Voter Education Project activities in Louisiana during 1964, Adam Fairclough, *Race And Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995) pp. 313-317.

<sup>114</sup> Anon., ‘COFO Project in Meridian, Mississippi summer 1964’ 17 August 1964 p. 1. CORE series 5 box 15 folder 3. The report was written by one of the project directors in Meridian.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.* pp. 3-4.

using generally the same books. The only area in which the CORE curriculum differed was, predictably, that which explored the historical significance of the twentieth century freedom struggle – CORE’s involvement was emphasised much above that of SNCC.<sup>116</sup> Still, the knowledge and learning that came out of the history classes were corollary benefits. As the Western Regional Action Council asserted, the classes, ‘should be used as a means to involve the community, [in CORE work] not just as an end to themselves.’<sup>117</sup> Although Rita Schwerner, based in Meridian, was influenced by SNCC’s example, she was still of the opinion that political programmes were the soil in which cultural programmes could grow. As she asserted, ‘political and voter registration programs are an integral, if not the most important, part of the center’s activity.’<sup>118</sup> The more cultural or abstract activities could, in Schwerner’s view, develop out of these central programmes. Even so, she was unconsciously aware of the value of cultural activities to her CORE work: recruitment of local people for the community centre was slow until she began to offer sewing classes. Thereafter, adults were keen to join in the activities.<sup>119</sup>

Occasionally, CORE displayed a commitment of sorts to the cultural enrichment of Mississippi. Members of CORE’s Mississippi campaign acknowledged that culture could play a role in southern organising. CORE’s Southern Education Project planned to present an Africa Night and produce a CORE ‘Guide to Negro History and Literature,’ illustrating that, once again, individual CORE initiatives sometimes adopted a cultural approach to organising without necessarily involving CORE’s central

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<sup>116</sup> Monroe CORE, ‘Freedom School Program’ n.d. p. 2. CORE-Monroe box 3 folder 10.

<sup>117</sup> Minutes of Western Regional Action Council meeting, 17 January 1964 – additional paper for discussion. CORE-Western Regional Office papers, SHSW box 2 folder 11. Hereafter cited as CORE-WRO.

<sup>118</sup> See Rita Schwerner, ‘Meridian Community Center’ 19 October 1964 p. 1. Scholarship Education and Defense Fund for Racial Equality papers, SHSW box 1 folder 14. The SEDFRE was established as part of CORE’s operations in Mississippi during 1964.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.* p. 1; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 276.

committees.<sup>120</sup> CORE's citizenship programme in Louisiana, again influenced by SNCC's work in Mississippi, also acknowledged the value of education but, again, gave it a low priority. Political and economic considerations were the most important to the CORE programme in Louisiana, with social issues such as desegregation of public facilities being more important than community centres and freedom schools. The primary function of these institutions was to be political leadership training, with literacy classes as an afterthought.<sup>121</sup>

Some metropolitan chapters attempted to graft SNCC's freedom schools concept on to northern ghettos, with mixed results. CORE's chapter in Columbus, Ohio adopted a freedom school project in 1964 and, again, focused on its political ramifications, concentrating on instilling in the students the attitudes and skills needed to succeed at school. Thus the students were tested and streamed according to ability and success was measured on attendance and further examinations.<sup>122</sup> CORE's commitment to the concept of the freedom schools can be questioned. By late 1964, it had concluded that such projects were too heavy a burden on its resources and leadership. Furthermore, the organisation felt that it had been unsuccessful in motivating local people. By the end of the summer, CORE found many of its centres and schools without enough involvement from the community to justify their continued existence.<sup>123</sup> Field reports were confirming that COFO was suffering from a crisis in confidence as well as direction, leading some in CORE to conclude that the traditional focus of CORE – voter registration – be maintained at the expense of the other projects and that CORE staff begin to pull out of the state.<sup>124</sup> Although the NAC discussed the value of cultural

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<sup>120</sup> Benjamin A. Brown, memo to George Wiley, 'Recapitulation of C.S.E.P. Operations' 1964, post 22 October pp. 1-2. AGP box 1 folder 14.

<sup>121</sup> CORE document, 'Future CORE Program in Louisiana' 4 September 1964 p. 2. CORE series 5 box 12 folder 4.

<sup>122</sup> Carole Kestler, 'Columbus CORE Report to the National Convention' fiscal year 1964, pp. 6-7. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 3.

<sup>123</sup> Haley, 'CORE in the South,' p. 3, George Wiley, memo to NAC members and all staff, re Southern Staff Workshop, 2 February 1965 p. 2. McKP folder 6949.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Jewett, 'Mississippi Field Report' 19 January 1965 pp. 2, 4. McKP folder 6959.

propaganda and the implications of 'thinking black' at this time, it refrained from establishing policy on the issue, preferring to leave the matter in the hands of the chapters.<sup>125</sup>

## Conclusion

For the civil rights movement, 1964 proved to be a major turning point. The SCLC saw its message reaching into the highest echelons of the United States government and began to appreciate the value of culture to the movement. Although 1965 is quite rightly viewed as the SCLC's watershed year due to the Selma campaign and the organisation's reaction to the Watts Riot, it actually made tentative steps into the North during 1963 and 1964. Martin Luther King led a march in Detroit during June 1963. Following summer disturbances in Rochester, New York, Andrew Young led an abortive six-man SCLC delegation into the town.<sup>126</sup> King was enlisted by Mayor Robert Wagner to help mollify the black population in New York City after a white policeman had killed a young black man. At its September 1964 convention, King reported that the SCLC had to grapple with the growth of northern protest in cities with large black populations. Declaring the northern expeditions a success, he stressed that the SCLC had to expand from its southern base to maintain the movement's momentum.<sup>127</sup>

In 1964, CORE learned that its emphasis on politics in local organising did not necessarily produce demonstrable results. The COFO Summer Project did not result in vast numbers of newly registered voters and the MFDP challenge to the Democratic

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<sup>125</sup> Minutes of NAC meeting 10-12 October 1964 p. 3. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1.

<sup>126</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing In The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 21-25, 27-28, 30-32; Garrow, *Bearing* p. 345; Fairclough, *To Redeem* pp. 196-197. Andrew Young makes no mention of the New York expedition in his autobiography, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

<sup>127</sup> Branch, *Pillar* pp. 423, 487-488; Garrow, *Bearing* p. 353. Note also King's reference to the problems of the inner cities in a November 1964 article, 'Negroes Are Not Moving Too Fast' James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) pp. 176-181. Young disagreed with King's idea, feeling even after the Watts riot that SCLC should be concentrating on the South. Young, *Easy* pp. 380-381, 384.

Party resulted in failure and acrimony. On the other hand, in ceding control of local initiatives to local activists, CORE experienced the growing militancy of the inner cities. It was not long before CORE was instituting compulsory classes in black history for all its chapters. Despite its equivocal response to SNCC's Mississippi challenge, CORE left ever more power in the hands of local groups. Whilst this change was a reflection of long-term trends within the organisation, 1964 proved to CORE that a sole focus on voter registration would not inevitably lead to freedom.

For SNCC the Summer Project was more of a success, due in no small part to the cultural initiatives of the freedom schools. SNCC's decision to enter into every facet of black life in Mississippi was crucial to the development both of the organisation and of civil rights protest. In accepting that the culture of the South needed changing, SNCC went further than other civil rights organisations dared. Through its education and cultural activities, SNCC hoped to create a new self-awareness and a new generation of leaders in Mississippi. It made African American history part of the civil rights movement's weaponry to establish that the 1960s struggle was part of a long-term historical process. Whilst its political campaign was questioning America, its cultural campaign was reinforcing American ideals and emphasising the American roots of African American protest. It placed African American letters at the centre of American literary history and asserted that African American culture was fundamental to African American freedom. Although the short-term political aims of the Summer Project collapsed amid the chicanery of American party politics, the long-term and more abstract proposals in the project opened up the possibilities for thousands of Mississippians. Despite idealism not triumphing in Atlantic City, SNCC could legitimately claim that its successes were in the tradition that the organisation aspired to. Its work instilled a new sense of community and history in black Mississippi. From this, SNCC helped to develop the community's confidence in its own abilities to organise and to agitate. It also affected CORE's conception of the struggle and drew the organisation towards SNCC's model of community organising.

Many volunteers and staff burned themselves out over the course of the summer and SNCC simply did not have the finances to repeat the experiment. However, a number of volunteers wanted to stay in the South to ensure that the freedom schools continued to offer a different experience of education for young Mississippians, although the new school year was to affect attendance. The FST took inspiration from its audiences to prolong the experiment in developing protest through theatre, deciding to settle in New Orleans in order to cement its relationship with the black community. Most importantly in the context of the civil rights movement, the Summer Project plunged SNCC into an introspective phase that was to alter its philosophy fundamentally. Although the betrayal of MFDP at Atlantic City proved that, when blacks played by the rules, the white man always won, education in the Summer Project suggested that black culture could be a very useful organising and uniting tool.

The Summer Project represents the beginning of a new phase in the movement's relationship with African American culture. SNCC's projects prior to 1964 were tentative attempts to immerse itself in the black community. In Mississippi during 1964 it successfully did so. The Project convinced many SNCC activists that African American culture was a viable organising tool and a vital component of the freedom struggle. The freedom school curriculum placed African American history at the centre of the freedom struggle and urged its students to conceive themselves as historical actors. Students of all ages were encouraged to learn about their own history and culture and understand the depth of the African American contribution to America. Thousands had their minds opened to theatre, poetry and new forms of music. Throughout the rest of the 1960s, SNCC activists attempted to replicate the successes of the 1964 Summer Project, revealing its profound effect on the organisation. But its legacy was not only in terms of SNCC's programmes. The collapse of the MFDP challenge and the pressure that SNCC staff members experienced over the summer plunged the organisation into a period of self-analysis, from which it arguably did not fully recover. The psychological trauma of summer 1964 resonated within SNCC for some time.

## 5.

### **Restoring Cultural Roots: Resurgent cultural nationalism in 1964**

On 22 December 1963, Paul Robeson, in relapse from chronic depression and suffering from heart problems, returned to the United States. Declaring that he had been part of the civil rights movement for his entire life, Robeson rededicated himself to the African American freedom struggle.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, his health restricted him to a statement in the black press during summer 1964 in which he announced that he would be unable to recommence public life and told of his great admiration for the ‘Negro Freedom Fighters and their white associates... waging the battle for civil rights throughout the country.’<sup>2</sup> His return though, symbolised the new awareness among a number of movement activists that a cultural approach to their work was viable and beneficial, and it began a year in which certain African American cultural figures, such as Amiri Baraka, involved themselves ever more in the movement. During this year, the issue of the worldwide black population – specifically that in Africa – began to loom large in the minds of a number of activists.

Baraka received plaudits and press attention for a number of politically charged plays that were first produced during 1964. *Dutchman* signalled his final break with his Beat Generation-inspired bohemian phase and suggested that he was fast becoming a

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<sup>1</sup> “‘Part Of Rights Movement All My Life’ Says Returning Robeson’ *Jet* 25,12 (9 January 1964) pp. 52-53; Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (London: Pan, 1989) p. 521. For Robeson’s health, *ibid.* pp. 498-520.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Robeson, press statement 28 August 1964. Duberman, *Paul* p. 525.



black radical. 1964 represented Baraka's first full engagement with the civil rights movement. Previously he had commented on the movement, but he had not explicitly utilised the movement for his fiction. Elsewhere in the black world, culture was becoming more important as a unifying force. *Negro Digest* devoted an article to the 'essence of Soul' in May. Defining soul as a spiritualism unique to black folk that combined hope, despair, politics, emotion; a 'common secret,' the article concluded that, 'soul is the common denominator, the Great Identifier; the path of synonymity from the crib to the grave, from the gutter to the throne.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *Ebony* profiled a young singer who specialised in 'a Gospel-tinged blues idiom pioneered by the old "blues preacher" himself, Ray Charles.' Aretha Franklin was asked to define her voice: 'I guess most people call it "soul."<sup>4</sup> Although *Billboard* suspended the publication of its R&B charts on 30 November 1963, ensuring that black records that did not enter the pop charts were often ignored, soul music, as *Ebony* suggested, was becoming more popular. The suspension had come about because *Billboard* felt that a segregated chart for music that quite often leaped over racial boundaries had become outdated. However, by the end of 1964, African American tastes had once again become so distinct that a separate chart was again deemed worthy.<sup>5</sup>

For Motown Records in Detroit, 1964 represented the beginning of its classic period, when its house musicians crystallised the Motown sound. That year saw the massive success of Mary Wells' 'My Guy' (number 1 on the *Billboard* pop charts), Martha and the Vandellas' 'Dancing in the Street' (number 2), The Supremes' 'Where Did Our Love Go?' and 'Baby Love' (both number 1) and, at the end of the year, The Temptations' 'My Girl' (number 1 on both pop and the newly reconstituted R&B chart) followed on 27 December by The Supremes' first appearance (of twenty) on the Ed

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Westbrook, 'The Essence of "Soul"' *Negro Digest* May 1964 p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Swingin' Aretha' *Ebony* March 1964 pp. 85, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (London: Books With Attitude, 1997) p. 49; Brian Ward *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998) pp. 174, 176. The R&B chart returned in January 1965.

Sullivan television show.<sup>6</sup> Even though Marvin Gaye dismissed their rise as ‘an accident of history,’ as Suzanne E. Smith notes, The Supremes’ rise to national fame during the summer ‘marked a watershed in the history of the record company... and – on a national level – in the promotion of “Negro Life” in America.’<sup>7</sup> Soul music was now firmly in the national consciousness. The Impressions, led by Curtis Mayfield, released the first of their explicitly civil rights-influenced hits in 1964, with ‘Keep On Pushing,’ (number 10 pop) which featured the couplet:

Now maybe someday I’ll reach that higher goal,  
I know I can make it, with just a little soul.<sup>8</sup>

On 13 April, Sidney Poitier made history as the first black man to win the Best Actor Oscar. The Oscar offered him a gold-plated opportunity to bring the civil rights movement firmly into the public consciousness.<sup>9</sup> It was a missed opportunity. *Jet* reported that Poitier declared his indebtedness to ‘countless numbers of people,’ naming his closest associates and friends, with nary a mention of the black freedom struggle.<sup>10</sup> Even after the hubbub had subsided, Poitier still refused to link his award with the movement, claiming that it was ‘a mandate to intensify my moves toward increasing my potential as an artist.’<sup>11</sup> ‘I am proud of my heritage, of being a Negro,’ he admitted, ‘but

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<sup>6</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville* pp. 49-50; Motown discography (appendix 1), Kingsley Abbot (ed.), *Calling Out Around The World: A Motown Reader* (London: Helter Skelter, 2001) p. 243; Larry Gabriel, Harry Weinger, Cary E. Mansfield, Robin Simms, liner notes to various artists, *Hitsville USA: The Motown Singles Collection, 1959-1971* (London: Universal CD, 1992) pp. 18-21, 55, 56. Motown only had two previous number ones on the pop charts.

<sup>7</sup> Marvin Gaye quoted in David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (London: Michael Joseph, 1985) p. 98; Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing In The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 117. See also LeRoi Jones, ‘Apple Cores #1’ in LeRoi Jones (Amiri Imamu Baraka), *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1968) p. 120; Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, revised edition 1997) p. 305 for the importance of Motown and popular soul records in 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991) p. 140. Lyrics reprinted in Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.) *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs* (Bethlehem PA: Sing Out, 1990) p. 309. Chart position from Alan Hodgson, liner notes to The Impressions, *People Get Ready: The Best of The Impressions featuring Curtis Mayfield, 1961-1968* (London: Universal CD, 1997) p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Jet* 25,26 (9 April 1964) p. 61. The microfilm of *Jet* renders the title of the article indecipherable. Incidentally, the theme song to the film for which Poitier won his Oscar was ‘Amen,’ performed by The Impressions. Hodgson, liner notes p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Poitier quoted in Louie Robinson, ‘Academy’s Oscar Brings Sidney More Money, Boost in Career’ *Jet* 26,3 (30 April 1964) p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Poitier quoted *ibid.* p. 61.

that has little to do with my being the finest artist that I know how.’<sup>12</sup> Much later, Poitier linked his speech with the movement. His autobiography claims that, during the ceremony, he ‘happened on the phrase, “It has been a long journey to this moment,” [to open the speech] and immediately nailed it down as the most symbolic, lyrical, and illuminating possible.’<sup>13</sup> His contemporary remarks, however, suggest that Poitier was referring primarily to his own journey rather than that of the African American struggle.

Conversely Dick Gregory was thoroughly aware of the colour of his skin. His involvement with the movement continued throughout 1964, with the activist-comedian appearing at demonstrations in the North and South, conducting a 30-day tour for SNCC early in the year and cancelling so many paid performances in favour of action that he soon found himself heavily in debt.<sup>14</sup> This parlous financial state was exacerbated by Gregory’s willingness to perform for free wherever he was wanted to tell the truth rather than jokes. The former was his preferred gig because, he shrugged, ‘if the South integrated tomorrow, I’d have more places to work.’<sup>15</sup> Near the end of the year, Gregory published his (first) autobiography, entitled simply and pointedly, *Nigger*. *Jet* reported that the title was lambasted by some black leaders. Surprisingly so, according to Gregory, who characteristically quipped that ‘wherever you hear the name nigger... you know they are advertising my book.’<sup>16</sup>

In March, *Ebony* reported on a call by a black athlete – supported by Gregory – for a black boycott of the 1964 Olympic Games unless full and equal rights were

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<sup>12</sup> *Jet* 25,26 (9 April 1964) p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney Poitier, *This Life* (London: Coronet, 1980) p. 293. Reports confirm that Poitier opened his speech with this phrase. Robinson, ‘Academy’s’ p. 60; Sharon Waxman, ‘The Oscar Acceptance Speech: By and Large, it’s a Lost Art’ *The Washington Post* 22 March 1999, accessed at <http://members.fortunecity.com/goddesslouisie/articles/oscrpost.htm> (25/03/02).

<sup>14</sup> SNCC staff meeting minutes, June 9-11 1964 pp. 27, 29. Howard Zinn papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) box 2 folder 7. The minutes reveal that SNCC was in debt to Gregory to the tune of \$10,000. Also Larry Still, ‘Comedian Doubts Freedom Fight Will Hurt Show Business Career’ *Jet* 25,22 (19 March 1964) pp. 14-20.

<sup>15</sup> Still, ‘Comedian’ p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1964); *Jet* 27,13 (31 December 1964) p. 43.

guaranteed for African Americans.<sup>17</sup> The winner of the 1960 Olympic gold for heavyweight boxing, meanwhile, continued his rise to prominence. Early in 1964, Cassius Clay won the heavyweight championship of the world. This thrust the boxer onto the front pages and into the front line of a dispute within the Nation of Islam. By the end of the year, even Martin Luther King, Jr. was hoping that some of the boxer's star quality would rub off on him. King wrote to Muhammad Ali, as he was now known, to tell him that he looked forward to a possible meeting, indicating that the movement was beginning to interact with the world of sport.<sup>18</sup>

Ali also touched Malcolm X who, during his *hajj*, used Ali's international status as a means to forge personal bonds and break down otherwise insurmountable language barriers. In 1964, Malcolm X came to the conclusion that black culture was a viable unifying force and set about to integrate it into his emerging vision for African Americans. During his second visit to Africa, he met SNCC's John Lewis and Don Harris. They returned to the United States with a new optimism about Malcolm X's proximity to SNCC and to the viability of a cultural approach to organising. Other SNCC activists who visited Africa developed similar conclusions as to the worth of the motherland to the psychology of black America. In the wake of these visits, James Farmer was selected to visit Africa by a CIA-funded organisation in order to emphasise the moderation of the civil rights movement. Although his trip had less immediate effects on CORE's conception of the struggle, it provided Farmer with an insight into the direction that his more radical cohorts, both within and without CORE, were moving. In general, although CORE remained wedded to a political focus and Gandhian techniques, certain initiatives such as the freedom houses and CORE's imaginative protest at the opening of the 1964 New York World's Fair, indicate that CORE activists were coming to appreciate the worth of using culture as a weapon.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ebony* March 1964 p. 95; Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969) p. 41; Gregory with Lipsyte, *Nigger* pp. 207-208.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., telegram to Muhammad Ali, December 1964. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 1 reel 20 frame 00265. Hereafter cited as SCLC. This study will refer to Muhammad Ali by his chosen name.

## Amiri Baraka

1964 was a year of change for Amiri Baraka. The successes of his plays pushed him into the limelight and his increasing proximity to black nationalism pulled him further away from his bohemian life. Jerry Gafio Watts notes that Baraka spent a significant portion of 1964 shouting down whites in various public forums, often in the company of saxophonist Archie Shepp.<sup>19</sup> He also offered his support to Muhammad Ali, believing that Ali's pantomime demonstrated the rise of a new generation of black men.<sup>20</sup> However, it was not all fun and games. Four of his plays were produced in New York, announcing the arrival of his militant voice in the theatrical world.

The first of Baraka's plays to be produced that year was *The Baptism*. Ostensibly a critique of the Christian church and its attitude towards sex (and in particular, masturbation), the play essentially avoids racial issues in favour of blasphemy and absurdity. *Dutchman*, still Baraka's most famous play, is about black-white, specifically sexual, relations that won a 1964 Obie award for the best off-Broadway play. At heart, the play suggests, we are all savages. Those who mask savagery with civility (read: middle-class blacks) are doomed to death at the hands of those who conceal their savagery more subtly (read: whites). It also includes a swing at whites who affect hipness – a white woman, Lula, attempts to prove to a middle-class black man, Clay, how hip she is by dancing in a fake black manner. As Lula starts to mock black culture, Clay becomes agitated, then offended and finally threatens to kill her. Clay's refusal to take on the mantle of the revolutionary by fulfilling his threat leads to his emasculation and death at the hands of Lula, who enlists other whites to dump the body. *Jet* hailed the play as 'frighteningly frank and roaringly realistic,'

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<sup>19</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) pp. 135-136; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual: From its origins to the present* (London: W.H. Allen, 1969) pp. 485-486 mentions these episodes, linking them with Baraka's anti-Semitism.

<sup>20</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'In The Ring' *The Nation*, 29 June 1964. accessed on 07/07/00 at: <http://www.thenation.com/historic/bhm2000/19640629jones.shtml>.

considering it to be an apocalyptic vision of what might happen if race relations continued to deteriorate.<sup>21</sup> *The Toilet* also concerns itself with racial identities: an unrequited schoolboy interracial homosexual love affair leads to black on white violence and, finally, reconciliation between the near-dead white boy and Footh, the black boy. *The Slave*, set in a future race war, also concerns interracial love and can be interpreted as a companion piece to *Dutchman*. A black revolutionary leader and over-educated poet, Walker Vessels (a nod to David Walker and Denmark Vesey), returns to the home of his white ex-wife to reclaim his daughters for the black race and symbolically wipe out his integrationist past. Walker's wife has now married his white former literature professor, whom Walker kills in act two. The play ends with the death of Walker's wife and daughters amid an apocalyptic barrage of explosions.<sup>22</sup>

Baraka's impending conversion to black nationalism and racial essentialism is tangible in the 1964 plays. Baraka's strident nationalism could not be reconciled with his marriage to a white Jewish woman, Hettie Cohen. His 1964 work – particularly *The Slave* – can be interpreted as a reflection of his frustration at his domestic situation and as a foreshadow of his separation from Cohen, which occurred in 1965. The corrupting influence of interracial relationships is a common theme of the plays, as is Baraka's disgust at white attitudes towards black people. The white educational structure is also fully implicated in Baraka's damning critique of race relations. In *Dutchman*, Clay's emasculation is a direct result of his white education. *The Toilet* is set in a racially polarised school and in *The Slave*, Vessels returns to slay his white teacher both physically and metaphorically.

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<sup>21</sup> Art Sears, Jr., 'Realistic Play Dramatizes Growing Negro-White Split' *Jet* 25,26 (9 April 1964) p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York: William Morrow, 1964); LeRoi Jones, *The Baptism and The Toilet* (New York: Grove, 1967). Watts, *Amiri* pp. 65-84 for a neat synopsis and an unsatisfactory critical appraisal of the four plays; Kimberly W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) pp. 151-202 for a laudatory interpretation; Donald P. Costello, 'Black Man As Victim' in Donald B. Gibson (ed.), *Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes, and LeRoi Jones* (New York: New York University Press, 1970) pp. 206-212 for a more contentious view.

The plays conclude that the future of the races lies with separation: the fundamental distance between black and white individuals (*Dutchman*) or the demands of the race at large (*The Toilet* and *The Slave*) result in it being an elusive and pointless goal. While the black characters in *Dutchman* and *The Toilet* assume a slightly tragic pose, it is apparent that their downfall is their relationship with white society. Clay's ambivalence when faced with white taunting leads to his death, whereas Foots finds his intellectual nature challenged and ultimately subverted not by a black gang but by a white homosexual. By *The Slave*, Baraka's black characters had rejected double consciousness to align themselves with their racial identity. All those who accepted integration were doomed, a message that characterised Baraka's drama until his conversion to Leninism in the 1970s.

During 1964, Baraka also complained that: 'Negroes, when they make art, must carry the weight of white America's social and cultural stupidity, as well as the ordinary burdens of art's responsibilities.' Baraka, reflecting Langston Hughes' argument in 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,' was painfully aware that white America would see a black person in art and interpret them as representative of his race – 'an advertisement for the NAACP, but very rarely as a man.'<sup>23</sup> He encountered this in the responses to *Dutchman*, when critics wondered what characteristics of their race Lula and Clay exhibited. Thus the black artist – and Baraka – had to struggle with being pigeonholed as a 'Negro writer' or a race writer, as well as being simply a writer. For Baraka, the appellation 'Negro writer' implied a second-rate talent at the mercy of the white, middle-class critical establishment.<sup>24</sup> He certainly did not desire white approval for his work, but rejected being pigeonholed on the grounds that it imposed white cultural mores on black culture.

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<sup>23</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'LeRoi Jones Talking' in LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966) p. 186; Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' in Addison Gayle, Jr. (ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1971) pp. 167-172.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Jones, 'LeRoi Jones Talking' p. 180, *passim*.

Baraka claimed that American society was corrupt, oppressive and doomed to failure, suggesting that the only viable alternative was black nationalism and that, within black nationalism, blacks should be focused on the unity that their culture could produce. Baraka also maintained that art and the artist had a central role in the African American liberation struggle – at least in print. In 1964, Baraka became fully aware of the power of the movement and how it could inform and benefit his writing. Despite being painfully aware that whites would not walk down the street and notice a ‘cultured nigger,’ from a plain nigger, Baraka was urging his people to affirm and organise around their separate culture.<sup>25</sup> He was about to start practising what he was preaching. Baraka also became seduced by Malcolm X’s rhetoric at this time. He asserts that Malcolm X ‘changed me in a way no one else had ever done. He *reached* me... What it meant to my life immediately was words in my head coming out of my mouth.’<sup>26</sup> Despite this identification, Baraka’s rhetoric reflected the Black Muslim Malcolm X rather than the emerging Sunni Muslim El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

## Malcolm X

1964 defined the life of Malcolm X. He drew ever closer to the civil rights movement without necessarily adopting the movement’s philosophy, grew to appreciate the value of culture as a unifying force and became aware of the symbolic power of sport in American life during the same period. He first met Muhammad Ali in Detroit during 1962, soon after Ali turned professional. Due to Elijah Muhammad’s diktat that the Nation of Islam should not concern itself with such trivialities as sport, Malcolm X was initially unaware that he was meeting the reigning Olympic heavyweight champion. However, he became curious about the charismatic boxer’s interest in the Nation of Islam.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Baraka quoted in Watts, *Amiri* p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* pp. 273-274. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1965) p. 413.



Ali was certainly not the first politically significant African American boxer. Jack Johnson and Joe Louis were political as well as sporting characters. Floyd Patterson was an NAACP member and Sonny Liston revelled in his position as a violent 'bad nigger.'<sup>28</sup> Ali, however, chose to align himself with the Nation of Islam and, in doing so, assumed greater political significance than any of his pugilist precedents and peers. Ali initiated a deeper relationship with Malcolm X during January 1964, attending a Nation of Islam banquet and inviting Malcolm to visit his Miami training camp prior to his fight against world champion Sonny Liston.<sup>29</sup> Malcolm X was keen to establish a friendship, being aware of the value of gaining such a prominent supporter. With his life in turmoil after his suspension from the Nation of Islam, the thought of a few days' holiday was also alluring. This blossoming friendship became a significant nexus between politics and sport in 1964. Whilst in Miami, Malcolm X confessed to George Plimpton that he was not only interested in Ali's friendship: 'I'm interested in him as a human being. Not many people know the quality of mind he's got in there.'<sup>30</sup> Although an apparently innocent remark, it reveals much about the motivation behind Malcolm X's overtures to Ali. To Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam only viewed Ali as a propaganda weapon. For him, Ali was a potential political ally was represented an exciting opportunity to unite politics and sport in one fast, tough, photogenic and articulate package. Malcolm X's statement suggests that a kernel of truth exists in Black Muslim Jeremiah Shabazz's claim that Malcolm X was using Ali as a publicity tool and

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<sup>28</sup> Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, 'Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945' *Journal of Sport History* 10,3 (winter 1983) pp. 5-25; Jack Johnson, *The Autobiography of Jack Johnson: In The Ring and Out* (New York: Citadel, 1992, first published 1927); Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1999) pp. 20-29; David Remnick, *King Of The World: Muhammad Ali and the rise of an American hero* (London: Picador, 1999) pp. 13-25, 222-230, 277-278; Maureen Margaret Smith, 'Identity and Citizenship: African American Athletes, Sport, and the Freedom Struggles of the 1960s' (PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1999) pp. 105-131.

<sup>29</sup> 'Clay Has His Say About Way He Spends His Day' *Jet* 25, 16 (6 February 1964) p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Malcolm X quoted in George Plimpton, 'Miami Notebook: Cassius Clay and Malcolm X' in Gerald Early (ed.), *The Muhammad Ali Reader* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1998) p. 33. Originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, June 1964.

as a pawn in a power game.<sup>31</sup> There can be little doubt that Malcolm X came to the conclusion that Ali represented both a chance to prove Elijah Muhammad's fallibility and an opportunity to bolster the ranks of his own supporters. Muhammad was convinced that Ali would lose his upcoming world heavyweight title fight with Sonny Liston and wanted little to do with a loser.<sup>32</sup> Malcolm X hoped that Ali would soon see through Elijah Muhammad and choose to follow a more orthodox Muslim faith.

Ferdie Pacheco, a member of Ali's entourage, takes a benign view of the friendship, observing that, 'it was almost like they were in love with each other... The Muslims filled a deep need in him, especially Malcolm X.'<sup>33</sup> It seems more likely that the boxer filled a need in Malcolm X, whose circle of friends was rapidly shrinking following his estrangement from Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm X was aware of the delicacy of the circumstances which prevented him attracting publicity to his new friendship. Notwithstanding his own gagging order, the boxing fraternity was suggesting that the title fight might be cancelled if it came to light that Ali was consorting with a Black Muslim.<sup>34</sup> However, Malcolm X was desperate to ensure that his influence within the American Muslim world did not diminish completely – hence both his interest in Ali and his reticence to use Ali to his full advantage. He prayed to Allah with Ali before the fight and took up a ringside seat near Sam Cooke, another of Ali's friends. Malcolm X later claimed that he always knew that Ali would win. However, Ali's decision to join the Nation of Islam and subsequent rejection of their relationship must not have been in his plan, nor was Elijah Muhammad's renaming of

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah Shabazz quoted in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (London: Pan, 1991) p. 106. See also Mike Marqusee's claim that Malcolm X was attempting to mould Ali's political views at this time. Marqusee – unwittingly – suggests that Ali was easily led into the polarised world of the Nation of Islam without fully understanding the subtleties of Malcolm X's words and unconvincingly argues that Malcolm X saw the strength of character that would propel Ali towards his position as the most important athlete of the twentieth century. Marqusee, *Redemption* pp. 73-78.

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* p. 417 crows that Muhammad did not even send a representative of his own newspaper to cover the fight.

<sup>33</sup> Ferdie Pacheco quoted in Remnick, *King* p. 165. Ali might have needed the smart person around him – after failing the mental section of his Army induction test, he joked 'I just said I was the greatest; I never said I was the smartest.' *Jet* 25,26 (9 April 1964) p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Hauser, *Muhammad* pp. 64-67.

Ali – which Malcolm X called a ‘political move.’<sup>35</sup> In the wake of Ali’s victory, it became apparent that Malcolm X himself was not what Ali needed. Rather, the extended family of the Nation of Islam was more important to the boxer.<sup>36</sup>

Following the muddled conclusion to his meeting with Muhammad Ali and his expulsion from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X became more isolated from racial essentialism and began to hone his conception of black nationalism. His visit to Africa between 13 April and 21 May 1964 transformed him into a truly international figure and afforded him the opportunity to express himself more freely on a number of racial issues. Bruce Perry claims that Malcolm X had outgrown the Nation of Islam’s racial theories in the late 1950s, but his position within the organisation prevented him from saying so. It would be more accurate to assert that Malcolm X’s racial attitudes changed during the early 1960s but Perry is correct to note that, by 1964, Malcolm X was simply waiting for the right moment to reveal himself.<sup>37</sup> The trip to Africa in 1964 was such a moment. His freedom afforded him the opportunity both to speak his mind and to show how he had broadened his conception of the liberation struggle to encompass culture as well as politics.

Early in his first trip Malcolm X tried to overcome language barriers by mentioning the name Muhammad Ali, leading many to think that *he* was the heavyweight champion of the world. Allying himself with Ali proved to be a crucial cultural breakthrough for Malcolm X and, in his autobiography, the relief that he felt upon being acknowledged as an American Muslim is palpable.<sup>38</sup> It suggests that

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<sup>35</sup> Malcolm X quoted in Taylor Branch, *Pillar Of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) p. 251.

<sup>36</sup> Ali de-emphasises his relationship with Malcolm X in his autobiography, preferring to focus on Malcolm X’s identity as a Black Muslim – understandably so, given that his co-writer was also a Black Muslim. Jim Brown recalls hearing Ali telling him almost immediately after the fight that he was intending to reject Malcolm X in favour of Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (St. Albans: Mayflower, 1976) pp. 120-127; Jim Brown, oral testimony in Hauser, *Muhammad* p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1991) pp. 206-207, 268-269.

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* pp. 440-441.

Malcolm X was aware of the international appeal of sport in bringing races together – ironically so, given that Ali chose to ignore him when they bumped into each other in Ghana during May.<sup>39</sup> The varying fortunes of the two were starkly illustrated in *Jet*, where Ali was quoted mocking Malcolm X's dress, beard and cane and Herbert Muhammad pointedly noted that Malcolm X no longer had any support in the black community. Meanwhile, Malcolm X's letters home regarding his "new" beliefs were presented as further proof of his identity crisis.<sup>40</sup>

One of the myths that has built up around Malcolm X is the suggestion that he first revealed his idea about the philosophical and cultural return to Africa in his letters home. Although this was the first time that his ideas on this subject were spread to a large audience, a reading of his speeches prior to his *hajj* suggests that Malcolm X had already arrived at the ideas, but that his visit to Africa effectively crystallised them. Speaking at Harvard University in March 1964, Malcolm X claimed that one of the central tenets of black nationalism was the focus on 'the cultural roots of our forefathers, that will lend dignity and make the black man cease to be ashamed of himself... The restoration of our cultural roots and history,' he continued, 'will restore dignity to the black people in this country.'<sup>41</sup> Although the largely white audience recoiled at his suggestion, Malcolm X proceeded to explain that this cultural unity was not racism in reverse. Black nationalism, for Malcolm X, was grounded in his sense of a united culture and history, as well as a political philosophy. Prior to his African trip, Malcolm X articulated this background as central to the creation of dignity amongst African Americans. Racial essentialism was still the key – at least in public – with the social philosophy behind black nationalism giving black people a greater sense of self and another reason to reject white interference in their struggle. However, in Africa,

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<sup>39</sup> Perry, *Malcolm* pp. 270-271. Reflecting his rejection of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X refers to Ali as Cassius Clay in his recollection of the meeting, despite the fact that he talked of Muhammad Ali in Mecca. Malcolm X, *Autobiography* p. 476. See also Alex Haley quoted in Hauser, *Muhammad* pp. 109-110; Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (London: Virago, 1986) pp. 143-144.

<sup>40</sup> 'Report Clay "Revives" Lip In Africa, Attacks Malcolm' *Jet* 26,8 (4 June 1964) pp. 54-55.

<sup>41</sup> Malcolm X, speech at Leverett House Forum, Harvard University 18 March 1964 in Archie Epps (ed.), *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard* (New York: Paragon House, 1991) p. 142.

Malcolm X was able to articulate himself more freely, dropping the use of the term “black nationalism,” and emphasising that African Americans, ‘become an integral part of the world’s Pan-Africanists, and even though we might remain in America physically... we must “return” to Africa philosophically and culturally and develop a working unity in the framework of Pan-Africanism.’<sup>42</sup> Although Bruce Perry paints a rather prosaic picture of this change – that it was made with one eye on fundraising in foreign countries – the rhetorical shift from black nationalism to, as Perry puts it, ‘Afro-Americanism,’ suggests a more inclusive and less aggressive use of black history and culture to unite the freedom struggle.<sup>43</sup> This simple rhetorical shift encapsulates the subtle philosophical modification that Africa wrought on Malcolm X.

At the founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, (OAAU) Malcolm X reiterated the need for a cultural element to the freedom struggle. ‘A race of people,’ he told his audience, ‘is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfil itself.’<sup>44</sup> Malcolm X urged African Americans to explore the history of black people in Africa, and to look further back than the era of slavery in order to repossess their culture. He knew that the African American’s roots lay in Africa, and were being expressed on a daily basis: ‘when you hear a black man playing music, whether it is jazz or Bach, you still hear African music. The soul of Africa is still reflected in the music played by black men.’<sup>45</sup> Indeed, during 1964, Malcolm X explicitly linked jazz to his political organising, noting the similarities between improvisational jazz and the black (or, rather, his) search for new forms of politics and philosophy. While some might conclude that this simply meant that Malcolm X was making things up as he went

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<sup>42</sup> Malcolm X, letter from Accra, 11 May 1964 in George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965) p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Perry, *Malcolm* pp. 273-274.

<sup>44</sup> Malcolm X, speech at OAAU founding rally, 28 June 1964 in George Breitman (ed.), *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970) p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Malcolm X, comments at Harvard Law School Forum, 16 December 1964 in Epps (ed.) *Harvard* p. 160.

along, it also illustrates his acceptance that there was a relationship between politics and African American culture. He told his friends, 'we must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people... This cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves.'<sup>46</sup> To this end, Malcolm X and the OAAU proposed the establishment of a cultural centre in Harlem to conduct workshops in history, writing, theatre, art, music and other cultural areas. Although it did not become a reality – the OAAU's organisational instability saw to that – the cultural centre was clearly part of Malcolm X's plan to ensure the complete liberation of African Americans. Ultimately, 1964 saw Malcolm X placing black history and culture at the centre of the worldwide liberation struggle and saw his ideas gaining currency within SNCC and CORE, and on the west coast of the United States.

## **CORE**

Although CORE rarely engaged with culture as a tool for its campaigns, a small number of initiatives indicate that the organisation was beginning to come to terms with the nexus between culture and politics. They sometimes backfired: a benefit poetry reading at Columbia University featuring Alan Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky caused offence to at least one New York City resident. Hope Hale Davis was so incensed at Orlovsky's 'strip act' that she told James Farmer that it was irresponsible and scandalous that CORE was aligning itself with such depravity.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, CORE undertook a plan to disrupt the World's Fair that opened in New York City in April 1964, bringing direct action and politics into an unashamed and supposedly apolitical celebration of inclusive American culture.

In April, CORE's NAC unanimously accepted proposals to demonstrate at several state and commercial pavilions at the World's Fair in order to dramatise the

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<sup>46</sup> Malcolm X, speech at OAAU Founding Rally pp. 63-64. Quote pp. 54-55.

<sup>47</sup> Hope Hale Davis, letter to James Farmer 2 December 1964. The Congress of Racial Equality papers, SHSW series 5 box 16 folder 7. Hereafter cited as CORE. Marvin Rich promised Ms. Davis that he would investigate the matter. It was not resolved.

continuing existence of racial discrimination and highlight the issues surrounding the southern filibuster of the Civil Rights bill.<sup>48</sup> A small 'stall-in' on one of the routes to the World's Fair failed to prevent thousands attending its opening day, 22 April.<sup>49</sup> However, the threat of the stall-in perhaps contributed to the fact that under 30,000 people paid to attend the opening day, 200,000 less than had been expected. Hecklers upstaged President Johnson's speech and thousands of CORE demonstrators disrupted the enjoyment of the Fair's visitors by picketing a number of pavilions.<sup>50</sup>

Although CORE envisaged its World's Fair protests to be in the tradition of nonviolent direct action, that the organisation considered picketing such an event suggests that it was fully aware of the political role of cultural events. The World's Fair was an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate the vibrancy, diversity and supremacy of its culture. It de-emphasised politics in order to attract tourists, investment and cultural kudos from around the globe. CORE ensured that the sterile, apolitical atmosphere was sullied with the everyday dirt of American life, emphasising once again that culture and politics went hand in hand. The protests also signified CORE's final departure from its policy of insisting on proper dress for its protesters. San Francisco Bay Area CORE groups had abandoned the suits, ties and no trousers for women rules late in 1963.<sup>51</sup> Within a few months, the dress code throughout CORE relaxed, culminating in the World's Fair protest. Whether CORE intended to repel World's Fair visitors with scruffiness is highly unlikely, although the *New York Times* singled out the general untidiness of a number of protesters and suggested that many visitors were

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<sup>48</sup> Minutes of the Steering Committee of the CORE National Action Council, 11 April 1964 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Jet* 26,4 (7 May 1964) p. 31; *New York Times* 23 April 1964 pp. 1, 29; James Farmer, *Lay Bare The Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1985) p. 258.

<sup>50</sup> *Jet* 26,4 (7 May 1964) pp. 14-17, 32-33; *New York Times* 23 April 1964 pp. 1, 26, 28; Farmer, *Lay Bare* pp. 259-260; James Farmer, *Freedom – When?* (New York: Random House, 1965) pp. 34-35; figures from *New York Times* 23 April 1964 p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 251.

appalled at their hirsute appearance.<sup>52</sup> More importantly, the relaxation of the dress code at this time represented an important change in CORE policy and suggests that CORE was becoming less concerned with the façade of demonstrations and more focused on their meaning. It also indicates the growing importance of the urban, more working-class chapters who recruited – crucially – from a largely African American constituency at the expense of the white, middle-class elements within CORE.

CORE was the first of the major civil rights organisations to move into large-scale ghetto organising but, once again, its involvement in this sphere reveals that local chapters led the way in exploring the use of culture as a political weapon. In Philadelphia, CORE had been agitating on the issue of slum landlords and rent extortion since spring 1963, using a combination of public pressure, sit-ins and meetings with opposing parties.<sup>53</sup> CORE also established a number of freedom houses in various ghetto areas. The houses were conceived as a similar project to SNCC's community centres in the South. Denver CORE established its freedom house during 1964 after growing dissatisfied with the chapter's success in the middle-class area of town. Reflecting CORE's recent move into ghetto organising, Denver CORE saw itself and the house as 'one and the same, and no separation is foreseen.'<sup>54</sup> As well as being the centre of operations for local campaigns, the house was to offer educational and cultural programmes, such as courses in black history although, once again, the priority was to develop political participation in the local community. A similar project was undertaken in Oakland, California, where the freedom house was made independent from the chapter administration. Here, CORE attempted to grapple with the issues of ghetto life and give the community the opportunity to express what it wanted to be done in its own area. In addition to the political activities, the freedom house hoped to 'provide a cultural alternative to not only the ghetto culture but also to mid-twentieth century white

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<sup>52</sup> *New York Times* 23 April 1964 p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> See Philadelphia CORE, 'CORE Goes Slumming' November 1963. Alan Gartner papers, SHSW box 1 folder 9. Hereafter cited as AGP.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of Western Regional CORE Convention, 27-29 November 1964 p. 1. AGP box 1 folder 13.



American culture,' through its educational and cultural programme.<sup>55</sup> Oakland's freedom house set up tutorial, recreational and educational programmes, art classes and a film club for children, and involved itself in local campaigns about litter and sanitation. Oakland CORE felt that these projects, since they were based on local initiatives rather than CORE directives, built up a level of trust within the community that CORE often did not find elsewhere. The chapter urged national CORE to grant autonomy to the houses in order to cement this trust.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, CORE's habitual problems with finance and programmatic direction also hit the freedom houses and, far from becoming the focal point for community organising, many stumbled along without direction and discipline. The Oakland house, for example, effectively became a settlement house for the homeless, leading local CORE chapters to withdraw their support.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the struggles of the freedom houses, by the end of 1964, certain CORE staff members were advocating that the organisation should move more of its operations into the ghetto. Joyce Ware, while assessing CORE's work in the north-east, cited an office located in the ghetto as essential to CORE in Kingston, New York.<sup>58</sup> In his 1964 address to the CORE convention, James Farmer expressed his satisfaction with CORE's ghetto work during 1963, feeling that it had been a successful start to a new phase in CORE's operations. Farmer hoped that this work would develop a solid base from which CORE could expand and cement its vanguard position in the protest movement.<sup>59</sup> However, CORE remained firmly wedded to the idea that political organising and

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<sup>55</sup> 'First Progress Report on Freedom House' 15 October 1964 p. 7. CORE-Oakland chapter papers, SHSW box 1 folder 3. Hereafter cited as CORE-Oakland.

<sup>56</sup> West Oakland Freedom House Project, 'CORE encounters the ghetto' 1964. CORE-Oakland box 1 folder 3.

<sup>57</sup> Gretchen Kittredge, chair of Berkeley Campus CORE, letter to Oakland Freedom House Organising Committee, 1 September 1964. CORE-Oakland box 1 folder 3.

<sup>58</sup> Joyce Ware, memo to Lou Smith, James McCain, Floyd McKissick re Kingston CORE, November 1964 p. 3. Floyd B. McKissick papers, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill folder 6957. Hereafter cited as McKP.

<sup>59</sup> James Farmer, 'Report of the National Director' at CORE Annual Convention 2-5 July 1964 pp. 1-2. AGP box 1 folder 4.

agitation was the key to success. As Farmer put it, 'where ever there is job discrimination we must do battle against it in the historical CORE methods.'<sup>60</sup>

Within a few months, though, Farmer was becoming aware of the need to expand the scope of CORE's work. In October 1964, fearful of the internal bickering in CORE's NAC, piqued by its criticism of him and wary of the organisation's continuing failure to create an effective sequel to the Freedom Rides, he presented proposals for CORE's 'New Directions.' Farmer experienced the growing racial militancy in some northern and western CORE chapters. Although he remained firmly wedded to the concept of interracialism, he began to appreciate that CORE's focus on the South and its failure to address the issue of racial difference within the movement were limiting the organisation's success. He was also becoming influenced by Malcolm X's black pride message and felt that CORE needed to address this issue; one that it had not yet come to appreciate. His proposals included the establishment of a Cultural Action Department to explore the African American identity crisis through studying history and culture. Farmer was keen that CORE's national office respond to the challenge laid down by the radicalisation of many CORE chapters and embrace the emerging African American mood. Thus identity and culture were to become points of reference for CORE activism. The NAC spent some time discussing the implications of, as Farmer put it, 'thinking black,' and suggested that further canvassing of chapters was needed to formulate policy on this issue.<sup>61</sup> However, just as the mooted cultural committee failed to advance beyond the planning stage in 1963, the Cultural Action Department did not progress to the action phase. That CORE declined to fund such an explicitly cultural programme suggests that most activists within CORE's higher echelons remained sceptical about

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> James Farmer presentation to CORE NAC, 10 October 1964 in NAC meeting 10-12 October 1964 minutes pp. 1-3. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1. An anonymous document suggests that Farmer's line of thought was not atypical. It suggested that CORE promote black history and attempt to close the culture gap between the working and middle class through practical initiatives. Anon, 'The Future of CORE and the Future Direction of the Civil Rights Movement' n.d. pp. 5-7, quote p. 6. McKP folder 7029. The folder is dated 1964-1965. On p. 5, it makes reference to the creation of a model community, later Floyd B. McKissick's pet plan. It is also in draft form on legal notepaper, suggesting that McKissick might be the author. However there are no other indications as to the author's identity.

the efficacy of such an approach. Once again it illustrates that CORE's relationship with African American culture before its adoption of black nationalism was determined largely by individuals rather than the organisation as a whole.

Although Farmer's initiative did not come to fruition in 1964 due to CORE's organisational inertia and a lack of initiative and funds, it did signal a new effort within CORE to acknowledge the centrality of cultural issues to political organising and an attempt to educate its own staff in such issues. Farmer was given an early opportunity to experience for himself the value of heritage and culture to modern African Americans when he was invited to visit Africa on the invitation of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). AMSAC decided that James Farmer would be an ideal figurehead for the civil rights moderates. Upon learning that Farmer was going to attack his message to Africa, Malcolm X contacted Farmer to urge him against such action. Farmer – a recipient of one of Malcolm X's postcards from Africa – reassured Malcolm X that he had no plans to do so. They jovially discussed racial philosophy at Farmer's apartment, where Malcolm X supplied Farmer with a number of African contacts to help the trip proceed smoothly.<sup>62</sup> That the meeting was successful suggests more than simply a personal bond between Farmer and Malcolm X. It also signifies the slowly decreasing distance between between CORE and black radicalism.

The aim of Farmer's trip to Africa was to develop ties between the civil rights movement as a whole and the newly independent African nations. Despite CORE's equivocation on its position within the movement and Farmer's protestations to Malcolm X, he set out to counteract SNCC's insistence of the strength of African American radicalism by spreading the moderate message of the civil rights mainstream. He also hoped to develop a liaison between the civil rights moderates and the African

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<sup>62</sup> Farmer, *Freedom* p. 96; Farmer, *Lay Bare* pp. 228-230; Goldman, *Death* pp. 218-219. Maya Angelou received a short note from Malcolm X regarding Farmer's trip that asked her to 'collect him and show him around. Treat him as you treated me. I am counting on you.' Angelou, *All* p. 194. Neither were aware that AMSAC was being funded by the CIA. Dan Schechter, Michael Ansara and David Kolodney, 'The CIA as an Equal Opportunity Employer' *Ramparts* 7,13 (June 1969) pp. 32-33 reveals the CIA's involvement in AMSAC.

nations, again to counteract the radical message. The additional sponsorship of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, which was composed of Farmer, King, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Dorothy Height and John Lewis, suggests that his message was to be one emphasising the value of nonviolent direct action, legal and political pressure, rather than one of solidarity and struggle. Whilst en route, Farmer received messages of support for the entire African American freedom struggle from Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Kenneth Kaunda.<sup>63</sup> Farmer reported back to CORE in February 1965 and betrayed no knowledge that his excursion had been sponsored by the CIA. Farmer's trip had minimal immediate effects on CORE, leading only to a censure from the NAC over Farmer's failure to consult others in CORE over his jaunt.<sup>64</sup> It certainly did not convince CORE to forge links with African liberation movements, perhaps because of the unpopularity of the tour within CORE's higher echelons. Nor did it immediately push Farmer towards a more Afrocentric approach to his work, in part because of the essentially conservative nature of the tour's sponsors and Farmer's need to emphasise the peaceful nature of the American freedom movement.<sup>65</sup> Despite this, it did presage a new chapter in CORE's history and initiated its move towards the radical wing of the civil rights movement.

By now, the influence of Africa had also spread to the pages of the SCLC's newsletter. In June 1964, it recommended Kwame Nkrumah's *Africa Must Unite* amongst the more current affairs-oriented recommendations of its Bookshelf column, suggesting that Africa was becoming a cultural point of reference for the organisation.<sup>66</sup> Martin Luther King, too, was citing the influence of Africa's 'great pageant of political

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<sup>63</sup> Farmer, *Lay Bare* pp. 229-230; Farmer, *Freedom* pp. 143-158.

<sup>64</sup> James Farmer, report on trip to Africa, minutes of NAC meeting, 6-7 February 1965 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1; Ruth Turner, memo re: 'Support of North Central Region Resolutions' January 1965 claims that Farmer left the organisation for a foreign trip at a critical time for the organisation, when it was engaged in a serious consideration of its direction. McKP folder 6949. See also report of Northern Regional Action Council meeting 23-24 January 1965 p. 6. McKP folder 6969. Farmer's ignorance of the CIA's involvement was so complete that he even convinced Kwame Nkrumah of his 'independent line.' Farmer, *Freedom* p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> That it was his second trip to Africa also reduced Farmer's visceral reaction to the continent. Farmer, *Freedom* pp. 133-135.

<sup>66</sup> *SCLC Newsletter* 2,7 (June 1964) p. 10. SCLC part 3 reel 4 frame 0342.

progress' on the new mood of the Negro and the African message that self-actualisation was the key to liberation.<sup>67</sup> In March 1964, he linked the civil rights struggle with the struggle for human and individual rights in Africa, but declined to develop this line of inquiry, choosing instead to draw his readers' attention to the legislative battle over the Civil Rights Bill.<sup>68</sup> The focus of his work during 1964 was on following the success of the Birmingham campaign with legislation and by attempting to unite the African American vote behind Lyndon Johnson. King did not explicitly suggest that a psychological or cultural return to Africa was essential, but the lessons of the anti-colonial struggle and the growth of black consciousness on the continent were clear to him.

### **SNCC and the return to Africa**

Africa was a potent image for SNCC even before the planning stages of the 1964 Summer Project. The 1960 Raleigh Conference recommended that SNCC align itself with the African struggle 'as a concern for all mankind,' and called on President Eisenhower to throw the weight of his office behind SNCC's struggle.<sup>69</sup> John Lewis made specific reference to the African freedom struggle in his March on Washington speech, linking the call in Africa for one man, one vote with the American civil rights movement.<sup>70</sup> In December 1963, SNCC representatives, including the Freedom Singers, met the Kenyan leader Oginga Odinga during his brief visit to the South, where songs and stories from both liberation struggles were exchanged. A subsequent integration of a local segregated restaurant led to the arrest and jailing of the SNCC activists, where

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<sup>67</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964) p. 22. See also pp. 33, 81, 87.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Hammer on Civil Rights' in James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament Of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) pp. 169-170. Originally published in *The Nation* 9 March 1964.

<sup>69</sup> 'Recommendations at Raleigh Conference' 15-17 April 1960. Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 1 frame 0011. Hereafter cited as SNCC.

<sup>70</sup> John Lewis speech (as re-written by James Forman) reprinted in James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985) p. 337.

Matthew Jones wrote a freedom song named after the Kenyan.<sup>71</sup> Lewis reiterated this identification with Africa during spring 1964, arguing that the southern black community was conscious of the African struggle and stating that his people had undergone a 'radical change... since 1960.' 'They are conscious of things that happen in Cuba, in Latin America and in Africa... All of them want to go to Africa,' he added.<sup>72</sup> During the planning of the Summer Project, Lois Chaffee of COFO solicited a number of handbooks on Africa for use in the schools.<sup>73</sup> Part of the curriculum included an appreciation of African history, which was naturally tied in with the history of African Americans.

The African trip – a 'mission of learning' for John Lewis – that involved ten senior SNCC staff members became one of the central events in SNCC history.<sup>74</sup> The group spent nearly one month in Africa during September and October 1964. For Ruby Doris Robinson, the trip was a revelation, bringing her African ancestry into sharp focus and stimulating her interest in Pan-Africanism. She returned from Africa keen to establish African, Caribbean and European Friends of SNCC groups.<sup>75</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer took great sustenance from seeing black people doing all the jobs that she had

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* pp. 360-361; Bernice Johnson Reagon, liner notes to Various Artists CD, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1997) p. 34; Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow, 1987) pp. 165-166.

<sup>72</sup> John Lewis interview in *Dialogue Magazine* 4,2 (spring 1964) in August Meier, Elliott Rudwick and Francis L. Broderick (eds.) *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, second edition 1971) p. 357.

<sup>73</sup> Lois Chaffee letter to Beryle Banfield, 29 May 1964. Papers of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (SNCC appendix A) reel 67 frame 0262.

<sup>74</sup> Quote from John Lewis, statement at February 1965 SNCC staff meeting p. 1. Social Action Vertical File, SHSW box 47. The visitors were Lewis, James Forman, Bob Moses, Dona Richards, Prathia Hall, Julian Bond, Ruby Doris Robinson, Bill Hansen, Don Harris and Matthew Jones. Fannie Lou Hamer made up the numbers. Harry Belafonte paid for the trip. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 134-135; John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998) p. 235; Belafonte oral history, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices Of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1990) pp. 204-206.

<sup>75</sup> Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) pp. 146-148. There are no indications that Robinson's ideas came to fruition.

previously seen white people doing.<sup>76</sup> James Forman suggested that, in political terms, the trip was not wholly successful. He felt that the group was too large for productive group talks and that the trip clashed with a number of other commitments for the Guinean government. Chief among these commitments were a series of cultural events – dances, theatre and musical events that were attended by large numbers of local people, including President Sekou Toure – which often lasted all evening. The SNCC delegation also attended these events as guests of the government. Forman was also told that the state-owned radio station had banned non-African music. ‘The Guineans,’ he later concluded (in Fanonist fashion) ‘had to win back their identity.’<sup>77</sup> For Forman, frustrating as they were, these cultural events were central to the decolonization process. That Toure conferred such importance on them suggested to Forman that culture was a vital element of the African liberation movement and could be utilised in the African American struggle.

For John Lewis, this trip of a lifetime was capped by his chance meeting with Malcolm X in Nairobi. Over two days, Lewis, Don Harris and Malcolm X excitedly discussed Malcolm X’s plan to petition the United Nations and his conceptualisation of a worldwide human rights struggle. Lewis reports that Malcolm X expressed his solidarity with SNCC and declared his pleasure at hearing that SNCC was developing an interest in African affairs. He encouraged Lewis and Harris to push further in that direction.<sup>78</sup> They departed hoping to establish greater communication between SNCC and the OAAU. Lewis and Harris then continued their tour, intrigued at the fact that

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<sup>76</sup> Carson, *In Struggle* p. 134. John Lewis concurred, expressing his joy at seeing ‘black people in charge,’ during the trip. Lewis with D’Orso, *Walking* p. 235. Muhammad Ali was later to declare exactly the same thing during a flight to Zaire in 1974 before his attempt to regain the heavyweight championship of the world, documented in Leon Gast’s film *When We Were Kings: The True Story of The Rumble In the Jungle* (London: Polygram, 1996).

<sup>77</sup> Forman, *Making* p. 409.

<sup>78</sup> Lewis with D’Orso, *Walking* pp. 296-297.

they always had to relate SNCC's views in terms of how they differed from Malcolm X, such was his influence on the African people.<sup>79</sup>

The trip convinced Lewis and Forman of the need for an African bureau within SNCC. On his return, Lewis proposed that SNCC establish a bureau, on the grounds that it would help develop healthy relations with African diplomats and visiting students or activists.<sup>80</sup> For Lewis it would be a boon to SNCC's political campaign whereas, to Forman, its cultural ramifications were of vital importance. Forman, in particular, was profoundly moved by the cultural emphasis of the Guinean government. An African bureau would be an opportunity to learn to adapt this to SNCC's work as well as develop SNCC's political links with Africa.

Mike Miller, a white SNCC activist in the San Francisco Bay Area, wished to rein in the fancies of the pilgrims. Miller admitted that African events were of 'tremendous importance in dealing with problems of identity and a sense of historical consciousness,' (not to mention the educational programmes of the freedom schools) but warned that concentrating too much on Africa might lead to SNCC neglecting important events at home. For him, 'UAW [United Auto Workers] affairs are probably more relevant to MFDP, COFO, and SNCC than African affairs.'<sup>81</sup> Miller's implicit rejection of the cultural emphasis of African affairs illustrates the tensions within SNCC over the issue of racial identity, politics and the direction of the movement. Miller was of the opinion that all this was nothing without a strategy and a plan for implementation. It also suggests that Miller was attempting to come to terms with the increasing popularity of black nationalism in the Bay Area without fully understanding its cultural emphasis. It certainly establishes that, despite the non-appearance of the African bureau, the effects of the African trip were percolating through SNCC's rank and file.

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<sup>79</sup> John Lewis and Donald Harris, 'The Trip' 14 December 1964 pp. 1-12. Samuel Walker papers, SHSW box 1 folder 2. It also notes that, whilst in Africa, they met Shirley Graham, David Du Bois and Julian Mayfield. See also John Lewis oral history, Hampton and Fayer, *Voices* p. 206.

<sup>80</sup> Lewis and Harris, 'The Trip' pp. 13-14.

<sup>81</sup> Mike Miller, memo to SNCC National Staff, 23 October 1964 p. 2. Stuart Ewen papers, SHSW box 1 folder 4.



Although Clayborne Carson's assertion that Malcolm X's meeting with Lewis and Harris led to 'a series of attempts by Malcolm to forge links with SNCC,' is somewhat of an exaggeration, it did lead to two important speaking engagements.<sup>82</sup> On 20 December 1964, Malcolm X spoke at a MFDP rally in Harlem after a performance by the SNCC Freedom Singers, in which they sang 'Oginga Odinga.' Malcolm X soliloquised at length on its meaning and its relationship to its subject, concluding that it, 'just knocked me out.'<sup>83</sup> On 31 December, Malcolm X addressed a group of Mississippi teenagers who had been sponsored by SNCC to visit New York City. Malcolm X told the students that, in his view, 'the greatest accomplishment that was made in the struggle of the black man in America in 1964... was the successful linking together of our problem with the African problem.'<sup>84</sup>

### **West Coast Organising**

While civil rights activists in the South and the east increasingly looked to Africa for inspiration, the west coast began to experience the growth of an explicitly cultural take on the freedom movement by 1964.<sup>85</sup> Howard University graduate Donald Warden helped to form a black student union at UC-Berkeley in 1961. Influenced by Robert F. Williams, the group decided not to admit whites and ordered its members to read Garvey, Baldwin, DuBois and Ellison as an introduction to their blackness. By March 1962, this group had evolved into the Afro-American Association (AAA).<sup>86</sup> The AAA soon attracted a large membership, some of whom organised a conference in 1964 that

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<sup>82</sup> Carson, *In Struggle* p. 135. Perhaps Carson has been swayed by the fact that many of the existing sources on the meeting come from John Lewis.

<sup>83</sup> Malcolm X, two speeches in Harlem, 20 December 1964 in Breitman (ed.), *Speaks* pp. 105-106, quote p. 135.

<sup>84</sup> Malcolm X, remarks at Hotel Theresa, 31 December 1964 – 'To Mississippi Youth' *ibid.* p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> Daniel Crowe, *Prophets of Rage: The Black Freedom Struggle in San Francisco, 1945-1969* (New York: Garland, 2000) pp. 99-100, 154, 163-168, 185.

<sup>86</sup> Donald Warden, interview with Robert Martin, 25 July 1969. RJB426 p. 32. Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Hereafter cited as RJOHC. Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide* (London: Wildwood House, 1974) p. 63.

emphasised the value of a cultural approach to organising at which, one of the organisers claims, Malcolm X appeared.<sup>87</sup> Others, inspired by the organisation's exploration of cultural issues, founded a quarterly journal entitled *Soulbook* and organised cultural education programmes for children in the Bay Area.<sup>88</sup> Two went on to form the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Various members of the group, inspired by the organisation's focus on black nationalism and frustrated at the hesitation of national black leaders, agitated for the AAA to become involved in action-oriented politics. So, rather than reading to each other, they 'just went out on the street corners and hollered,' in the Fillmore area of San Francisco and around the Oakland ghetto.<sup>89</sup> This largely unsuccessful hectoring led to the AAA instituting programmes in the community designed to promote racial pride and cultural awareness.<sup>90</sup> For Ernie Allen, the significance of the group lay in its appreciation that dignity was one of the keys to liberation, an issue that the integrationist movement was not addressing. Allen, who had been involved with the NAACP since high school, felt that the militant mood washing over the Bay Area, 'sort of turned people upside down.' The AAA's focus on researching and reading about black pride and radicalism was, for him, one of the most important legacies of the organisation.<sup>91</sup> Its success suggests that, by 1964, African Americans in the Bay Area had moved beyond the civil rights mainstream into concepts that were to receive greater attention as the decade progressed. While Mike Miller was urging SNCC to look to the union movement for inspiration, young Bay Area students

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<sup>87</sup> Welton Smith, interview with Malaika Lumumba, 30 January 1970 RJB347 pp. 3, 11. RJBOHC. Smith, a student at Stanford University, became a poet and writer after his involvement with the AAA. A number of his poems that eulogise Malcolm X appear in the classic LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: William Morrow, 1968) pp. 283-291. There is little evidence to verify Smith's claims about Malcolm X's attendance at the conference. Huey P. Newton claims that he heard Malcolm X speak in Oakland at a conference entitled 'The Mind of the Ghetto,' and adds that Muhammad Ali was also present, which suggests that the conference took place some time in early 1964. There are no other references to it. Newton with Blake, *Revolutionary* p. 71.

<sup>88</sup> Fred Lewis, interview with Malaika Lumumba, 20 January 1970 RJB494 pp. 6, 8, 9, 11. RJBOHC.

<sup>89</sup> Warden interview p. 34. RJBOHC.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* pp. 40, 42, 44.

<sup>91</sup> Ernie Allen, interview with Robert Wright, 15 November 1968 RJB347 pp. 1, 7. Quote p. 5. RJBOHC.

such as Huey P. Newton increasingly found inspiration in Warden's cultural nationalism and, naturally, the words of Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams.

Ron Karenga, formerly Ron Everett, also became involved with the AAA. Karenga was the first black student president of Los Angeles Community College and had been profoundly influenced by Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure and elements of socialist thought.<sup>92</sup> Karenga met Warden at Berkeley and was made chairman of the Los Angeles AAA chapter during 1963. Initially impressed with the AAA's focus on study sessions, tutorials and instruction in language and history, Karenga began speaking on Los Angeles street corners predicting a revolt, 'because there was a sense that the masses were at a breaking point.'<sup>93</sup> By 1964, his geographical and increasingly significant intellectual distance from Warden led to Karenga's isolation and, later, separation from the Berkeley group to form his own organisation.<sup>94</sup>

Although SNCC, CORE and the NAACP were present in the Bay Area, the growth of black nationalism among a younger generation of activists suggests much about the failure of traditional forms of activism in a racially-polarised area outside the South. None of the organisations was truly able to come to terms with the demand in the black colleges for a link between protest and culture. The growing influence of Oakland blacks in the local CORE chapters was just one example of the growing scepticism among young activists of the motives and effectiveness of middle-class whites.

## **Conclusion**

By the beginning of 1965, Malcolm X was making overtures towards other civil rights radicals. At the funeral of Lorraine Hansberry in January, he sounded out the possibility of a meeting with the archetypal African American artist-activist, Paul Robeson with

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<sup>92</sup> Scot Brown, 'The Us Organization: African-American Cultural Nationalism in the Era of Black Power, 1965 to the 1970s' (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1999) p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Ron Karenga quoted *ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Ron Everett-Karenga conducted by Clayborne Carson, 4 October 1977, side 1. Personal collection of Clayborne Carson. I wish to thank Professor Carson for granting me access to this recording.

whom, according to Bruce Perry, Malcolm X had identified since his time in jail.<sup>95</sup> He and Robeson's son agreed at the funeral that a meeting should be delayed until a less stressful time could be found for both men. It never came.<sup>96</sup>

Malcolm X's trips to Africa convinced him of the need to connect with the motherland, but his belligerence and wholehearted belief that the African American future lay in the United States militated against advocating a physical return. Although one must be careful not to overemphasise Malcolm X's conception of culture – it was certainly not interpreted as the panacea to the African American psychological crisis – that it would have played a role in his future plans is without doubt. The African trips of Malcolm X, SNCC and James Farmer were important events in the development of the movement in the wake of its early legislative successes. For all, it opened up a new appreciation of the worldwide struggle against oppression and led, or represented, their respective organisations' movement towards new perspectives in the African American struggle.

1964 witnessed a transformation within the movement. Amiri Baraka began to articulate a radical black consciousness through that was much more pronounced than in his previous work. Muhammad Ali was also drawn into the civil rights struggle. While these cultural icons established and defined their respective ground regarding the relationship of their profession to their conscience, Malcolm X was following his to Africa and beyond. Taking its cue from Malcolm X, SNCC entered its most introspective phase. The psychological and political crises of the Summer Project compelled the organisation to look inwards. SNCC's Summer Project confirmed its members' worst fears about the liberal establishment but also offered new avenues for the organisation to explore, particularly in terms of manipulating African American culture and history. Its profound effect on the psyche of SNCC's central cadre led directly to the restorative trip to Africa, during which the participants concluded that the

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<sup>95</sup> Perry, *Malcolm* p. 114.

<sup>96</sup> Duberman, *Paul* pp. 527-528.

organisation had to turn to the motherland for further inspiration. However, even Africa failed to halt this navel-gazing and served only to raise more psychological problems.

Although CORE's year was much less traumatic, its leadership was coming under ever more pressure from its more radical chapters to find a new direction. In 1964, the organisation saw its political focus assailed by the new demand for psycho-cultural liberation and its middle-class core slowly fragment as a result of the growth of its youthful working-class and racially militant cohorts. CORE also experimented with using traditional nonviolent tactics in a cultural setting with its World's Fair demonstrations. Although still wedded to the Gandhian tradition, the protests signified an appreciation of the value of cultural events to the national psyche. They also suggest that CORE's new generation was beginning to find its voice. Without the stall-in threat from the youthful and largely black Brooklyn chapter, the organisation might not have devoted so much time and attention to its demonstrations at the Fair.<sup>97</sup> The relaxation of CORE's dress code connotes more than a potential alliance with beatniks. It indicates that the organisation was becoming less concerned with conforming to rigid middle-class and mainstream standards, and more attuned to the youth movement. CORE activists took great inspiration from SNCC's success in insinuating itself into the black community and began to incorporate SNCC's concepts into their own initiatives, both in rural and urban settings. CORE's World's Fair protests acknowledged culture as central to America's image and the freedom houses attempted to graft the southern community centres onto northern ghettos. This "return" to the North symbolised CORE's awareness that it could not compete with the SCLC and SNCC in the South. 1964 suggested that it had to concentrate on its northern heartland in order to prosper.

The SCLC's involvement with African American culture during 1964 was characteristically tentative. Its commitment to the CEP remained solid, although it took little interest in the CEP's day-to-day operations and its St. Augustine campaign

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<sup>97</sup> For Brooklyn's involvement with the World's Fair protest, James T. MacCain, letter to Isiah Brunson (Brooklyn CORE), 15 April 1964. The Meier-Rudwick Collection of CORE papers box 3 folder 4; Steering Committee minutes, 11 April 1964 pp. 2-3. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 1.

continued the tradition set in Albany and Birmingham. Although King confessed that he believed in the right of people to their own education and culture 'for their minds,' he resisted expanding on this issue for the time being.<sup>98</sup> The significance of 1964 for the SCLC, rather, was the consolidation of its position as the pre-eminent civil rights organisation in the country. That it agreed to a moratorium of protests during the run-in to the Presidential election is emblematic of its role. However, under the surface, it was beginning to shift its focus to the North, as suggested by the mission to Rochester. This might seem a minor point but it establishes that, prior to the Selma campaign, the SCLC was seeking to expand the horizons of the civil rights movement.

Although outwardly, it would be plausible to argue that 1965 represented a titular end to certain phases in the three organisations' histories, in reality, the roots of these changes emerge in 1964. This suggestion assigns agency to the movement, rather than attributing it to outside influences. Although CORE first called attention to its return to the North with its 1965 convention, its work in 1964 foreshadowed this change of direction. The SCLC started to view the North with a new perspective, even though its operations were cautious and its conclusions muddled. 1964 was the most important year in the SNCC's history, when its critique of American society reached maturity. As 'soul' became important to black popular culture, so culture and identity became increasingly important to the civil rights movement. Many activists became fascinated with Africa, both as a spiritual and physical entity, and many returning pilgrims took the opportunity to emphasise how important identification with the motherland was to the freedom struggle. During the same period, Malcolm X's suspicions about the utility of African American culture to the freedom struggle came to fruition. He concluded that

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<sup>98</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech' in Washington (ed.), *Testament* p. 226. For the SCLC and St. Augustine, David R. Colburn, *Racial Change & Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985) pp. 61-175; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 181-191; David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1986) pp. 324-341, 344.

cultural freedom was a vital component of political freedom. Although his thought did not crystallise fully, Malcolm X came to intellectual maturity during this period.

In February 1965, as if to confirm that black history was an integral part of the civil rights movement, *Ebony* ran an editorial about that month's Negro History Week. It declared that 'every Negro today is a part of Negro history.'<sup>99</sup> The previous twelve months had been hugely significant in African American history. 1964 was not just a watershed year for the political civil rights movement. It also represented the beginning of a new phase in the movement's psychological war in which various activists, artists and intellectuals concluded that a focus on African American culture could ensure the progress of the movement. Their experience of 1960 to 1963 suggested that a cultural approach to organising was viable. 1964 proved that it was a valuable bulwark to political organising.

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<sup>99</sup> Photo-Editorial: 'You Are A Part of His Past' *Ebony* February 1965 p. 120.

## 6.

### **Integrationist hopes: The SCLC and Highlander's continuing influence, 1965-1969**

Between 1965 and 1969, the SCLC continued to stress the need for the movement to retain its integrationist commitments. It also made concerted efforts to spread its crusade to the northern states with limited success. Its engagement with African American culture in this period, however, remained tempered by its commitment to the Christian church and by the organisation's middle-class, respectable image. Despite this, between 1965 and 1969, it began to take note of the benefits of extolling the virtues of African American culture. Its annual conferences adopted a more African American identity, culminating in the 1967 'Black Is Beautiful' conference in Atlanta, Georgia. During the abortive Poor People's Campaign (PPC), the SCLC attempted to establish a model community called Resurrection City, with mixed results. At Resurrection City, cultural events became important methods through which the increasingly demoralised residents could come together and build a sense of community. A Highlander delegation was sent to participate in May 1968 and managed to create one of the few positive experiences of the project. Martin Luther King's writing also addressed the Black Power moment and suggested that he, too, was becoming appreciative of the worth of black culture to the movement. Nevertheless, the SCLC's view of culture remained balanced by its profound Christian faith. At the 1967 conference, Andrew Young took the opportunity to re-emphasise the debt that African American culture owed to the church. A plan to extend the CEP to the North also stressed the centrality of the church.



Throughout the 1960s, Young's assertion that the black church 'is black culture,' dominated the SCLC's relationship with African American culture.<sup>1</sup> Without such an understanding, one cannot appreciate why the SCLC refused to engage more heartily with Black Power. Furthermore, the SCLC's use of culture as a political weapon was tempered by the organisation's belief that it was ultimately a fundraising tool. Thus, when Coretta Scott King went on a singing tour in an attempt to emulate SNCC's Freedom Singers, the SCLC kept its eye firmly on the takings.

The continuing influence of Highlander on the movement during this period is often forgotten. Although the school continued to operate away from the media in the backwaters of the movement, it continued to inspire and sustain the commitment of a number of activists. It hosted a number of workshops at which activists discussed the past successes and future direction of the movement. Both black and white activists grew to understand the links between their heritage and their struggle. Even as Highlander retreated from movement work to focus on organising in Appalachia, it retained an interest in the development of the movement. Guy Carawan continued to organise and sing at music festivals, inspiring his audiences and his colleagues to explore their heritage. His work compelled a Southern Students Organizing Committee (SSOC) activist, Anne Romaine, to expand her work in the South to include folk festivals in order to preserve the unique culture of the South. She worked closely for a time with Bernice Johnson Reagon, whose work following her involvement with SNCC's Freedom Singers has received little attention from scholars. Their organisation, the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project (SFCRP) represents one of the last attempts at biracial organising during the 1960s civil rights movement. Although it was a short-lived and small-scale operation, it genuinely attempted to prolong the integrationist dream through a sincere engagement with black and white folk culture. That it was rent

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Young address to Black Is Beautiful meeting, 16 August 1967. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 3 reel 4 frame 0449. Hereafter cited as SCLC.

asunder over racial issues gives an insight into the hitherto-underestimated effects of Black Power on southern organising.

## SCLC

Under the watchful eye of Septima Clark, the CEP continued its work in the South. Victoria Gray reported to the SCLC in 1966 on CEP activities in Mississippi, asserting that,

as the struggle shifts from the overcoming of a common enemy to more diverse directions and objectives, the struggle for the minds of the masses presents quite a complicated and complex situation. Experiences of the recent past in Mississippi indicate that unless people understand in terms of their everyday life what specifically we are talking about when we speak of Freedom, Political Representation, Economic Opportunity and Self Determination, we might very well allow history to repeat itself in this century, just 100 years later.<sup>2</sup>

Gray's observations illustrate that, although SNCC's 1964 Summer Project was a failure in the sphere of high politics, at the grassroots level, it was a huge success. Its genius was to bring abstract concepts to local people and encourage them to relate to such concepts as realities. The CEP reported that, as a result of student demand, the curriculum was expanding its commitment to Negro history, noting also that, 'self realization is perhaps the most important result of the program.'<sup>3</sup> Predictably, Septima Clark had a hand in this, pointing out that the CEP was encountering problems that were not easily solved through basic reading and writing instruction. A more extensive programme would be needed in order to facilitate the spread of the CEP into other southern states such as Alabama and Louisiana.<sup>4</sup> However, late in 1967, the Field Foundation informed the SCLC of its concern about the project's reliance on one

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria Gray, report to SCLC Board Meeting 1966. SCLC part 3 reel 9 frame 0571.

<sup>3</sup> CEP Annual Report to SCLC Board Meeting, 29-30 March 1967. SCLC part 3 reel 10 frame 0212.

<sup>4</sup> Septima Clark, Citizenship Education proposal for 1965-1970 c. 1965. SCLC part 4 reel 11 frames 0250-0252. See also Septima Clark, report on CEP at Highlander Board of Directors meeting 14 May 1965. Highlander Research and Education Center records, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) box 2 folder 3. Hereafter cited as HREC.

funding source. After an initial increase in funding for 1968, the foundation advised Dorothy Cotton that its funding would progressively decline in subsequent years and also be dependent on matching funds from elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

In spring 1965, Coretta Scott King tried to break out of her role as Martin's wife by undertaking a brief singing tour. During the concerts, she performed movement standards alongside Christian hymns to emphasise the Christian faith of the SCLC's campaign. The songs were placed within a narrative of the movement from Montgomery to the present.<sup>6</sup> For Mrs King, these concerts were a release for her frustrated singing ambitions; an inspired concept where art and the movement combined in a 'practical, relevant, meaningful way,' and her 'unique' gifts as an orator, singer and activist could be utilised to the full.<sup>7</sup> The concerts were an undoubted success, netting the SCLC roughly \$20,000.<sup>8</sup> They also reveal much about the SCLC's attitude to the use of popular culture as a weapon in the movement. While the format of Mrs King's concerts was similar to that of the SNCC Freedom Singers, Mrs King did not intend her performances to be organising tools. Rather, they were a means through which she could pursue her singing career whilst maintaining an involvement in her husband's work. Where the Freedom Singers stressed that the movement needed the audience's participation, Mrs King suggested that the movement existed away from the concert hall and far from the audience's doors by keeping a clear distance between performer and audience. King wore flowing gowns when performing, rather than the work clothes that the Freedom Singers appeared in, further accentuating the distance between the concert and its politics. The struggle was presented in respectable, middle-class terms – Mrs King was, after all, a classically trained singer – and the concerts were carefully

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<sup>5</sup> Leslie Dunbar, Executive Director, Field Foundation, letter to Dorothy Cotton, 22 November 1967. SCLC part 2 reel 11 frame 0837.

<sup>6</sup> SCLC press release, 28 April 1965. SCLC part 3 reel 2 frame 0398. Concert programme for Coretta Scott King's performances. SCLC part 3 reel 2 frames 0400-0401. Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin, revised edition 1993) p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> King, *My Life* p. 230. For Mrs. King's career aspirations, *ibid.* pp. 44-45, 85-86, 87,88.

<sup>8</sup> SCLC 1966 Board Meeting reports. SCLC part 3 reel 9 frame 0389.

designed to avoid contentious and non-SCLC events such as SNCC's 1964 Summer Project. Mrs. King's target audience were the well-to-do, who could afford to spend relatively large amounts of money on attending such concerts and who felt they had more refined tastes than the working class. Although the concerts represent an attempt by the SCLC to use the culture of the movement to its advantage, they also suggest it considered culture to be a fundraising rather than a propaganda or organising tool.

By 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. had come to the conclusion that a social and political movement needed a psychological appendage, and he saw much of use in Black Power's insistence on racial pride and of the glory of African American culture and heritage. Simultaneously, King rejected its negative and aggressive connotations, stating that to offset the 'cultural homicide' that was being waged on black America, 'the Negro must rise up with an affirmation of his own Olympian manhood.'<sup>9</sup> King's metaphysical concept of freedom here comes close to that of Stokely Carmichael, who often maintained that psychological freedom was just as important as physical freedom.<sup>10</sup> Much of King's philosophical change came about as a result of the SCLC's encounter with the ghetto. While SNCC and CORE were experimenting with new forms of struggle during the early 1960s, King was continuing in the southern tradition of nonviolent direct action. Only with the outbreak of large-scale rioting did he begin to acknowledge the limitations of his conception of the struggle, and only after the failure of the Chicago campaign did cultural struggle truly begin to resonate in his mind. However, his acknowledgement during a late 1964 interview of the increasingly important symbolism of Africa to the American freedom struggle suggests that King

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1967), pp. 38-45, quote p. 50. This rhetorical foreshadow of the 1968 Olympic protests was repeated in King's 1967 presidential address to the SCLC. James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) p. 246. King also met with Harry Edwards, leader of the Olympic Committee for Human Rights in December 1967 to discuss terms for the proposed African American boycott of the 1968 Olympics. Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969) pp. 58-59; David J. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1986) p. 589.

<sup>10</sup> Stokely Carmichael, 'Power and Racism' and 'At Morgan State' in Ethel N. Minor (ed.), *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Vintage, 1971) pp. 25-28, 63.

was exploring the intellectual limits of his early philosophy and was coming to terms with the gradual shift of emphasis in the movement from the physical to the psychological. He confessed that there was 'a distinct, significant and inevitable correlation' between the African independence movement and the rise of Afrocentricity in the American movement.<sup>11</sup> For him, stronger ties between the two movements would strengthen the resolve of black people in both continents. The SCLC even tried such a tactic itself, inviting the permanent Nigerian ambassador to the United Nations, S. O. Adebó, to address its 1965 convention. Yet Adebó's address ruffled a few nonviolent feathers when he called for a worldwide black revolution and asserted that the home of this revolution would 'undoubtedly and inevitably' be Africa.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, no more Africans – diplomats or revolutionaries – were invited to address the SCLC convention during the 1960s. Adebó's militancy helps to contextualise King's tentative remarks on the value of Africa, centred on the economics of the Third World, in *Where Do We Go From Here?*<sup>13</sup>

Written in the heat of the Caribbean sun and the Black Power frenzy, *Where Do We Go From Here?* was influenced in part by King's recent reading of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and *Nobody Knows My Name*.<sup>14</sup> Although King felt that Black Power as a term was too suggestive and as a programme too negative, the mood of the movement at that time demanded his response. Delving into his study of Hegel and Du Bois, King acknowledged the impact of double consciousness and the frustrating search for heritage and culture, concluding that African Americans simply had to embrace their hybrid African and American identities to avoid losing themselves in a spiral of despair

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<sup>11</sup> 'Playboy interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.' in Washington (ed.), *Testament* p. 364. The *Playboy* interview, published in January 1965, took place in 1964. Taylor Branch, *Pillar Of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) p. 447.

<sup>12</sup> S. O. Adebó, address to SCLC annual convention, 10 August 1965. SCLC part 3 reel 8 frame 0661.

<sup>13</sup> King, *Where* pp. 199, 208.

<sup>14</sup> 'MLK's Tropic Interlude' *Ebony* June 1967 pp. 112, 118 mentions that, during his retreat to write *Where Do We Go From Here*, King read these books for the first time. See also approving quotes from Baldwin in King, *Where* pp. 61, 70.

and rage.<sup>15</sup> King considered such dual heritage as an advantage to the African American. By accepting and celebrating both, the African American would become a whole person, free of frustration at his or her inability to be truly African and free from shame deriving from his or her non-American cultural and racial roots.

Despite this positive outlook, King was increasingly worried about the pernicious effects of the militant mood, and addressed these feelings at a staff retreat in November 1967, referring a number of times to arguments outlined in the book. He was particularly sensitive to the rise of black consciousness and mused whether the anti-white rage that was allied to this feeling could be channelled more effectively. As he put it, 'to develop a sense of black consciousness and peoplehood does not require that we scorn the white race as a whole. It is not the race *per se* that we fight, but the policies and idiology [sic] formulated by leaders of the race to perpetuate oppression.' 'We must also be the custodians of creative black power,' King argued. 'We need to be proud of being black and not ashamed of it.'<sup>16</sup>

Even when the SCLC began to respond to this new mood in the African American community, it remained slightly aloof from the grittiness of African American culture. Its 1967 conference was the most explicitly cultural event in the organisation's life where Sidney Poitier, at the peak of his career, addressed the delegates, although his speech did not take the opportunity to expand on the relationship between culture and politics.<sup>17</sup> That same night the SCLC commemorated Aretha Franklin's vocal contribution to the advancement of the freedom struggle. And, in the spirit of the times, a Negro Culture and Heritage Evening – SCLC's first – was planned, with its theme, 'black is beautiful, it's beautiful to be black,' reflecting King's message in his annual report earlier that evening.<sup>18</sup> Bernice Reagon was invited to perform

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<sup>15</sup> King, *Where* pp. 61-62, 131-132.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., 'The State of the Movement' presentation to SCLC staff retreat, 28 November 1967. SCLC part 1 reel 21 frames 0086, 0093.

<sup>17</sup> Sidney Poitier, address to SCLC annual conference, 14 August 1967. SCLC part 3 reel 10 frame 0507.

<sup>18</sup> SCLC press release, 2 August 1967. SCLC part 3 reel 10 frame 0530. Phyl Garland, 'Aretha Franklin – "Sister Soul"' *Ebony* October 1967 pp. 47, 52; Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Annual Report of the President'

alongside Emory and the Dynamics, an SCLC rock group of freedom singers. Lerone Bennett, Jr. gave the keynote address, in which he argued that the movement had become both a social and a psychological struggle, and concluded that identity – both African and African-American – was central to the revolution.<sup>19</sup>

However, the struggle between secular and Christian culture in the SCLC was always to be a lop-sided battle. Andrew Young, also speaking at the event, reiterated the value of religion to the organisation: ‘you know in this church, nobody needs to tell you about black culture, because this church is black culture.’ Despite the powerful cultural legacy of the jazz era, which Young mentioned as ‘the very source and root of our being,’ ultimately, black culture was nowhere without the church and Christian love. ‘Never in this world,’ concluded Young, quoting Curtis Mayfield, ‘can there be too much love.’<sup>20</sup> Within this context, his invocation of Curtis Mayfield is significant. Mayfield had become a nationally-renowned singer-songwriter with his band The Impressions. His lyrics had moved into social commentary, particularly his 1964 hit ‘Keep On Pushing,’ which was often sung at Chicago movement rallies and marches during the late 1960s. His sound grew out of his upbringing in the church and his membership of a number of gospel vocal groups in his early teens.<sup>21</sup> As such, he was a perfect example of the SCLC’s conception of culture. His church roots and belief in interracial liberalism attracted older elements of the SCLC’s constituency, whilst his critique of racism and insistence on black pride ensured that he was popular with a youthful fan base.

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16 August 1967, SCLC Annual Convention 1967 programme. SCLC part 3 reel 10 frames 0514-0523, 0536.

<sup>19</sup> Black Is Beautiful programme, 16 August 1967. SCLC part 3 reel 4 frame 0444. Bennett address SCLC part 3 reel 4 frames 0445-0446.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Young address to Black Is Beautiful meeting, 16 August 1967. SCLC part 3 reel 4 frames 0449-0450.

<sup>21</sup> Other Mayfield compositions used by the Chicago movement include ‘People Get Ready,’ ‘Never Too Much Love’ and ‘Meeting Over Yonder.’ Guy and Candie Carawan (eds.), *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1990) pp. 288-293, 308-309; Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1991) pp. 136-142 for Mayfield’s early career.

Young's statement encapsulates the attitude of the SCLC to black culture and is crucial to an understanding of this relationship. While the SCLC acknowledged that the mood of black America was increasingly linked to African American culture, it could not conceive of a useful culture that existed outside Christian religion. Religion served as the only culture that the SCLC believed was able to protect the individual and the collective from the physical and spiritual ravages of segregation and white oppression. Where many Black Power advocates were arguing that secular black culture was the answer to the psychological oppression of white America, the SCLC maintained that a firm commitment to Christianity was just as important. The SCLC, therefore, tacitly rejected the identity politics of the Black Power generation and argued instead that the issue of identity was bound up in religious issues. As Young pointed out, the SCLC felt that there was no need to embrace a secular black culture, for the church provided all the culture that black America could want: its songs, its literature and its theatre. So, even as the SCLC was affirming that black was beautiful, it was stressing that Christianity was fundamental to the acceptance of this beauty. King's concessions to the radical elements of the movement and his increasing realisation that blackness was a central element of the African American freedom struggle did not extend to a full appreciation of the value of secular culture. He, too, was convinced that the black church provided the only true culture that African Americans needed. Although he was quite happy to see himself pictured alongside Aretha Franklin, his appreciation of her as a cultural icon was tempered by her position as the Reverend C. L. Franklin's daughter and her roots in gospel. Ultimately, just as Black Power for King was a poor second best to God's power, black culture for him and for the SCLC represented little without the black church.

This attitude is visible in the SCLC's plans to spread the CEP northwards. In March 1967 it made a proposal to the Ford Foundation for the funding of a project designed to train neighbourhood leaders in five major cities and establish a network for church leadership in 25 major cities. Aware of SNCC's focus on developing indigenous



leaders and the growing militancy of the ghettos, the SCLC proposed that the church be emphasised as a safeguard against the growth of this radicalism and as an alternative to the exclusively black cultural focus of this radical movement. The SCLC intended to co-ordinate church leadership in the cities to contain the growth of militancy and ensure the continued viability of the church in the inner cities. The proposal emphasised the cultural element of the CEP, arguing that it had 'capitalized on this need for racial identity by emphasizing Negro history and current events of immediate relevance to the participants,' and suggesting that the CEP therefore be extended into northern inner cities.<sup>22</sup> The SCLC was aware that religion was losing ground in the inner cities, as was painfully witnessed in its Chicago campaign and hoped that an emphasis on religion as an alternative culture could be viable. In July 1967, the SCLC announced that an education programme had started in Chicago which, it hoped, would become the model for similar programmes throughout the nation's inner cities. Classes would run through the summer and, along the same lines as the CEP and SNCC's Summer Project, would concentrate on remedial instruction in communication skills, writing, arithmetic and consumer education.<sup>23</sup>

Almost paradoxically, just as the SCLC was beginning to appreciate the value of blackness to the movement, the organisation was planning a mass multiracial campaign that would re-energise the movement and return its focus to the federal government. Reflecting a subtle change of the organisation's attitude to secular culture, the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign drew much sustenance from the Highlander ethos and acknowledged that culture could be an effective organising tool. The Reverend Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick was appointed director of the cultural programme and set out to address the issues of pride, heritage and common roots. Kirkpatrick, a former American footballer, became involved with CORE in Louisiana before joining the Deacons for Defense. An encounter with King convinced him of the futility of violence

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<sup>22</sup> SCLC Ford Foundation proposal, 1 March 1967. SCLC part 1 reel 2 frames 0851, 0861.

<sup>23</sup> SCLC press release, 17 July 1967. SCLC part 2 reel 11 frames 0010-0012. The programme received a \$109,000 grant from the United States Office of Education.

and led him into the SCLC and a realisation that poetry and song could play a role in the freedom struggle. He wrote and performed songs alongside white folk singer Jimmy Collier for SCLC, feeling that song was 'a weapon, to get through to the decent-minded whites of this country,' and a perfect vehicle to promote interracial understanding.<sup>24</sup>

In addressing the issue of race pride and heritage, Kirkpatrick felt that an encounter with heritage and roots proved the essentially American nature of the African American experience, rather than leading to an inevitable embrace of Africa. For him, 'poor people need[ed] to develop pride in – and awareness of – their past which, throughout their American experience, has been expressed artistically in an undying yearning for freedom and which in the case of black people and Indians links them to roots that predate contact with western civilization.'<sup>25</sup> For this reason, there was a folk culture tent in Resurrection City and a culture department was planned for the SCLC. A songbook was distributed by the PPC, which featured some of Kirkpatrick's compositions alongside movement standards. A newsletter, *True Unity*, which often featured the poetry of the city's dwellers, was distributed throughout the shanty town.<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther King also promised that the SCLC would institute freedom schools in Resurrection City that would emphasise the black contribution to philosophy and culture.<sup>27</sup>

Kirkpatrick's work also served to prolong Highlander's contact with the movement. One of his assistants was Anne Romasco, who had worked at Highlander developing the use of art, dance and literature as means to create understanding between groups. Naturally, musicians and artists, including the Georgia Sea Island singers, were

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<sup>24</sup> Biographical detail from 'A Big Angry Man Turns Nonviolent' *Washington Post* 17 June 1968 pp. B1, B6, quote p. B6.

<sup>25</sup> Poor People's Campaign press release 3 June 1968 p. 1. SCLC part 4 reel 27 frame 0494.

<sup>26</sup> 'We'll Never Turn Back' song sheet 1968. HREC box 106 folder 5. Diane Suggs, 'There is Peace in Blackness' *True Unity* June 1968. SCLC part 4 reel 28 frame 0578.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. speech, 19 March 1968 cited in James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (London: Fount, 1991) p. 230.

invited to Resurrection City.<sup>28</sup> An evening of folk music and poetry was organised in May, where American Indians performed traditional songs and spoke of their solidarity with the white poor, Elizabeth Cotton performed folk songs in the Appalachian tradition, Bernice Reagon talked of and sang freedom songs and spirituals and Pete Seeger concluded the evening with a trademark hootenanny.<sup>29</sup> Highlander itself ran a tent at Resurrection City, where Myles Horton – who was very excited about the initiative – and others led discussion groups and Guy Carawan continued his music workshops. Carawan's work again emphasised the cross-cultural bonds of music. Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians and whites were all encouraged to merge their singing traditions with those of the African American freedom struggle.<sup>30</sup> As Mike Clark noted, Highlander conceived Resurrection City not only as a political campaign, but a 'huge educational experiment.'<sup>31</sup>

Highlander's tradition of using songs as a means to enter into discussion about common problems and solutions encouraged meetings that lasted well into the night, with scheduled sessions developing into lengthy discussions, arguments, singing, eating and celebrations of cultural diversity. Visitors such as Rosa Parks, Elizabeth Sutherland and representatives of the Mexican-American and American Indian delegations were invited to join in the meetings. For Guy Carawan, one of the most important facets of Highlander's work in Resurrection City was the simple fact that it ensured that white faces who were not exploiting or oppressing peoples of colour were constantly present in Resurrection City. They formed a beacon of hope amidst the desperation of the campaign and a bulwark against the racial essentialism that bubbled under the surface of

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<sup>28</sup> Poor People's Campaign press release 3 June 1968 p. 2. SCLC part 4 reel 27 frame 0495.

<sup>29</sup> Mariette Wickes, 'Cultural Program: Poor People's Campaign' 30 May 1968. SCLC part 4 reel 28 frames 0446-0449.

<sup>30</sup> Conrad Browne, letter to Guy Carawan, 9 May 1968 p. 2. HREC box 109 folder 10. 'Singing and Discussion in Resurrection City' *Highlander Reports* fall 1968 p. 5. HREC box 1 folder 7. Also untitled notes on Highlander's role at Resurrection City; Myles Horton, letter to Bernard Lafayette (SCLC) 1 May 1968. HREC box 109 folder 10.

<sup>31</sup> Mike Clark, 'Resurrection City Comments' December 1968 p. 4. HREC box 105 folder 12.

the City's life.<sup>32</sup> Such was the success of the Highlander sessions – or the desperation of the City's organisers – that the PPC invited Highlander's delegation to merge with its own cultural programme. Thus cultural workshops were positioned even closer to the centre of Resurrection City, despite the SCLC's relative indifference. Faced with the immense problems of co-ordinating the shanty town, still reeling from King's assassination and suffering from damning press coverage and a lack of leadership, the SCLC focused on day-to-day organising of Resurrection City protests and, later, on negotiating a face-saving retreat from the protest. As the SCLC's Bill Rutherford complained, the SCLC spent more time 'trying to cope with [Resurrection City's] problems than dealing with actions.'<sup>33</sup>

The SCLC's ambivalent relationship with cultural organising continued after June 1968. Following the collapse of Resurrection City, the SCLC concluded that the town's multiracial character could be a rallying point for future campaigns. It was, after all, one of the few positives that could be drawn from the experience. The SCLC set out to instigate a Many Races Culture programme in 1968 to combine the musical and cultural heritage of American minorities and hyphenated Americans. John Henrik Clarke was invited to join an advisory panel that included Andrew Young and Wyatt Walker. The increasingly apocalyptic timbre of the SCLC's campaigning can be discerned in the Many Races Culture's statement of purpose that warned, 'this may well be one of our last chances to eradicate racism and point out to them their real enemies... join in what may be a last ditch effort to heal the sickness of racism which threatens to

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<sup>32</sup> Guy Carawan, report on Poor People's Cultural Workshop, Resurrection City, 20 May – 29 June 1968 esp. pp. 5-6. HREC box 109 folder 10. For Resurrection City, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement for the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1990) pp. 475-483; Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998) pp. 107-139; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1990) pp. 274-275.

<sup>33</sup> Rutherford quoted in Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) p. 386.

destroy our country.’<sup>34</sup> The Many Races Culture programme, however, could not contend with the problems that beset the SCLC in 1968. Its failure to materialise suggests how the SCLC was beginning to appreciate that the movement was now drawing sustenance from secular culture but that it had no idea how it could capitalise on this discovery.

The SCLC’s ambivalence about the use of culture after the 1964 Summer Project prevented the organisation fully committing itself to such work. Whilst certain initiatives suggest that the organisation continued to test the water in this area, the fact that it proposed so few programmes illustrates that the organisation preferred not to concede that secular culture was as important as religious culture. The ‘Black Is Beautiful’ conference served only as a propaganda exercise to win young hearts and minds. In the face of the increasing radicalism of youthful elements in the movement, the SCLC felt compelled to address issues such as race pride. Its continuing programmes, however, served to confirm that for the SCLC, the church was paramount. Even though Highlander insisted that positives could be drawn from the experience of Resurrection City, it proved to be a disaster for the SCLC. While the frequent hootenannies brought the Appalachian spirit to the shanty town, they could not prevent the town’s decline into petty criminality and despondency. The latter also militated against the SCLC becoming further involved in cultural organising, as it spent so much time trying to extricate itself from the mess that it had created. The turmoil that resulted from King’s assassination and the failure of the PPC confirm that, from early 1968, the SCLC was on the back foot, responding to events rather than creating and developing them. Always a low priority, cultural organising was further marginalised as the organisation stuttered and stumbled towards its uncertain future.

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<sup>34</sup> Field Report on SCLC Many Races Culture programme n.d. SCLC part 2 reel 12 frame 0283. The document states that one of the aims of the programme was to continue and build on the movement that developed in Resurrection City.

## Highlander's influence

Highlander was more assured of its future in 1968, having recently taken the decision to return to a focus on Appalachian organising. However, it retained an interest in the development of the civil rights movement. Myles Horton was drawn into the Black Power media controversy, but refused to condemn the political development of a movement that he helped to create, considering it to be a healthy and natural development in the true spirit of American dissent.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the late 1960s, Guy Carawan remained convinced of the value of folk song to the movement. His experiences on Johns Island, at Highlander and on the 1964 Caravan of Music tour, convinced him of the alienation of the black population from its cultural roots despite the popularity of black cultural forms in American popular culture. Late in 1965, Carawan organised a folk music workshop at Highlander to reacquaint southern black youth with their music and spur further meetings throughout the South. Some of the Georgia Sea Island Singers were present, as were Esau Jenkins, a number of SNCC activists including Charles Sherrod, Willie Peacock and Sam Block and Jerome Smith of CORE.<sup>36</sup> The workshop concluded that black culture was in danger of being obliterated and the participants devoted themselves to its preservation and dissemination as a unifying force. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Carawan and Julius Lester were selected to co-ordinate this effort. A statement of intent declared that black culture was an integral part of the freedom struggle and asserted that, through music, 'we will discover a bridge toward a prideful and democratic meeting ground with the white people of the South... We look forward to the time when Negro and white folk artists will swap songs on the same platforms.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Myles Horton, memo to Baxton Bryant, 4 October 1966; 'Highlander's Statement on Black Power and Charges of Communism' 15 October 1966; Myles Horton, letter to Marvin Goodstein, 23 November 1966. Highlander Research and Education Center records, University of Nottingham microfilm reel 37 frames 1029, 1033, 1042-1043.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Lomax, 'Folk Music Workshop at Highlander Center' *Southern Patriot* n.d. enclosure with Highlander fundraising letter, October 1965. HREC box 65 folder 2.

<sup>37</sup> 'Report on the Conference for Southern Community Cultural Revival' at Highlander, 1-3 October 1965 p. 4. HREC box 65 folder 2.

Of the attendees at the Highlander workshop, Reagon proposed to further her work with black college students in Atlanta and promised to report back to Highlander during 1966.<sup>38</sup> Julius Lester began touring the South as a roving field worker, sending back numerous detailed reports on cultural activities that resulted from the conference. Willie Peacock, who felt that there was 'no substitute in the overall struggle,' to developing pride through culture and heritage, and Sam Block went on to establish their own festival, courtesy of funds from the 'We Shall Overcome' royalty trust.<sup>39</sup> This, too, would strengthen the cultural ties between the southern black community and Africa, assisting in the creation of a new racial identity for African Americans. Peacock was certain that identity had become one of the central issues in the struggle for equality. His series of festivals that toured the South in 1966 were designed as a means through which this identity could be confirmed, celebrated and developed, spurring the black community to further action. He envisaged emphasising African culture in an attempt to highlight the common bond that linked black people around the globe. Peacock finally hoped that a group of African Americans would tour African countries to continue the festival's work.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst touring the South as part of his Highlander remit, Julius Lester met SSOC activist Anne Romaine. A deeply religious person, Romaine was profoundly influenced by the culture of the southern church and, in particular, Presbyterian tent meetings. She was keen to involve SSOC in community cultural revival programmes and became excited at the possibility of returning to Highlander to further these ideas, having previously attended Highlander in 1965.<sup>41</sup> She was already planning to conduct a

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<sup>38</sup> 'East Kentucky Mountain Project' report, 1 June – 15 December 1967. HREC box 37 folder 11. Bernice Reagon, letter to Myles Horton 21 Feb 1966. HREC box 65 folder 3.

<sup>39</sup> See Julius Lester, Report on Field Trip March 1 – May 22 1966; Julius Lester, Report from Newport Folk Festival July 1966; Julius Lester, Report on Greenwood, Mississippi Festival and proposals for the Negro Community Cultural Revival Project, February 1966. All HREC box 71 folder 3. Quote Willie B. Peacock, 'Folk Song Festivals' c. 1965-1966 p. 1. SNCC reel 40 frame 0050.

<sup>40</sup> Peacock, 'Folk Song' pp. 1-2. SNCC reel 40 frame 0050.

<sup>41</sup> Julius Lester, letter to Myles Horton received 4 April 1966. HREC box 104 folder 18. SSOC Workshop agenda, 17 September 1965; Anne Cook Romaine, 'Proposal for SSOC' 1 September 1965. HREC box 81 folder 4.

tour of southern localities with a collection of performers under the auspices of SSOC. Then a graduate student at the University of Virginia, Romaine had been brought up in rural North Carolina before working as a missionary in Mexico. After beginning to question her faith, Romaine returned to the United States. Soon after returning to the South, she joined SSOC and met Howard Romaine, a white SNCC activist and MFDP worker.<sup>42</sup> Romaine's initial idea, influenced by several SNCC activists including Robert Parris (formerly Bob Moses), was to import northern folk singers to spread the message and combat miseducation in the South. Her enthusiasm for cultural revival spread to Bernice Reagon, who had retired from the SNCC Freedom Singers to concentrate on her work with Guy Carawan. Reagon convinced Romaine at their first meeting of the efficacy of using community-based performers from the South.<sup>43</sup>

The first Southern Folk Festival tour gave 22 afternoon workshops and evening performances in March and April 1966, mostly for college audiences. A rolling bill of 20 performers, including Georgian balladeer Hedy West (daughter of Highlander's co-founder Don West), Eleanor Walden, Mable Hillery of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, the Reverend Pearly Brown, a blind street singer from Americus, Georgia and Romaine herself took to the stage. Romaine and Reagon's concept for the performances and the accompanying workshops was in the Highlander spirit, demanding audience and performer interaction. Each performance was structured around an historical narrative that drew on the expertise of the performers to flesh out the story. The use of white and black performers was a deliberate attempt to illustrate that southern cultures emerged from a tradition of resistance against oppression. All were to sit on stage together, taking turns to sing songs to illustrate a particular southern style, historical period, or

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<sup>42</sup> Romaine's biographical detail from Gregg Laurence Michel, "'We'll Take Our Stand': The Southern Student Organizing Committee and the Radicalization of White Southern Students, 1964-1969" (PhD thesis, University of Virginia, 1999) p. 104, quote p. 109. Also finding aid, Records of the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Hereafter cited as SFCRP.

<sup>43</sup> Bernice Reagon interview with Therese Spaude, 27 January 1982 SHSW cassette 1303A side 1. Anne Romaine, 'Southern Folk Festival' n.d. p. 1. HREC box 71 folder 2. Anne Romaine, 'Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project' 1982 pp. 1-2. SFCRP box 2.



even a philosophical point.<sup>44</sup> Although Romaine and Reagon were no class warriors, the inference that a common bond united the lower classes of all races was a result of this tactic. For Romaine and, to a lesser extent, Reagon, the folk culture of the South had been split along racial lines during slavery. Since white songs rarely explored racism and slavery's legacy, a burden was placed on black culture to acknowledge both, resulting in black folk culture focusing overwhelmingly, yet understandably, on the negative experience of the South.<sup>45</sup> Although Romaine's thesis derived from a misreading of ante- and post-bellum black culture that focused too exclusively on the work songs and the pleas for emancipation of the spirituals, its insistence that certain fundamentals united the two was intrinsic to her folk festival work. For her, and Reagon at this time, black and white southerners – especially students – had become ashamed of their culture, an emotion heightened by the experience of the civil rights movement and the consequent polarised national media portrayal of the South as a decadent, racist and corrupt society under assault from the civil rights movement. Their festival would bring southerners back into contact with their own culture, celebrating the South as a culturally diverse and distinct area of the United States whose proud tradition of resistance ran from the slave revolts through Populism, labour organising and the civil rights movement.<sup>46</sup>

Romaine arranged a workshop at Highlander in early September 1966, at which she discussed ideas with Carawan, Lester and other folk singers and activists. Even at the planning stage, Romaine was being buffeted by the racial turbulence of southern organising. Lester was in favour of moving into the white community, while Eleanor Walden preferred to maintain an interracial focus. Highlander staff, meanwhile, were encouraging Romaine to emphasise the intercultural links between black and Appalachian people. Romaine hoped that the workshop could establish common ground

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<sup>44</sup> Anne Romaine, 'Southern Folk Cultural' pp. 2-4.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Romaine, 'Southern Grassroots Revival Project – Narrative Script' c. 1981 pp. 2-3. SFCRP box 3.

<sup>46</sup> Anne Romaine and Bernice Reagon, SFCRP Foundation Proposal 1967 pp. 7-8. SFCRP box 3.

and discuss the value of using southern culture and folk revival as organising tools. She absorbed the Highlander ethos, confessing to her growing awareness that one of the most important aspects of organising was ‘to “think big but plan small.”’<sup>47</sup> A November workshop attempted to address the issue of the revival of black folk culture, particularly in the case of the Newport Folk Foundation, but somehow inevitably focused on white folk culture. Sixty-five people attended the performance evening on Saturday, but a Highlander report frankly admitted that seminar attendance was too low to make the workshop a success, even though it energised Romaine and convinced her that her skills were valuable to the movement.<sup>48</sup>

In spring 1967, Romaine organised a second Southern Folk Festival tour without the assistance of the poverty-stricken SSOC. She hoped that the core of five performers from the 1966 tour – Mable Hillery, Hedy West, Pearly Brown, Carawan and Reagon – would be augmented by local performers at each concert to emphasise the links between different folk cultures. The 1966 tour also featured cameos from Pete Seeger, Len Chandler, young folklorist Charles Joyner and DeFord Bailey, a black harmonica player who had performed on the Grand Ole Opry for some 30 years, among other local people. Most gave repeat performances in 1967 and even the John Birch Society – which was pursuing Seeger – joined in the fun, distributing handbills that, much to Romaine’s annoyance, billed Seeger above the other performers.<sup>49</sup> Following the 1967 tour, Romaine and Reagon resolved to incorporate the festival as an organisation to facilitate a wider range of programming and fundraising, calling it the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project.<sup>50</sup> The SFCRP reiterated that, by emphasising the historically

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<sup>47</sup> Anne Romaine, letter to Conrad Browne, 30 October 1966. HREC box 104 folder 18. Also Anne Romaine letter to Conrad Browne 5 August 1966; Conrad Browne letter to Anne Romaine, 28 September 1966; Guy Carawan letter to Myles Horton, Conrad Browne, Anne Romaine, 9 October 1966; Romaine letter to Browne, 22 October 1966. All HREC box 104 folder 18.

<sup>48</sup> SSOC Music Workshop agenda and report, November 1966. HREC box 104 folder 18. Romaine, ‘Southern Folk Cultural’ p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Anne Romaine letter to members of the Board of the Newport Folk Foundation, 3 January 1968 p. 1. SFCRP box 3. Romaine, ‘Southern Folk Cultural’ p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Romaine, ‘1967 Southern Folk Festival’ April 1967. HREC box 106 folder 11. Romaine, ‘Southern Folk Cultural’ p. 4.

biracial nature of southern culture, the two races could be brought together in the present. As Romaine and Reagon asserted, 'we feel it will be through the perpetuation of the many aspects of the cultures that make up a larger Southern culture that we, as a people struggling for a new South can learn from our grassroots traditions... to build a more harmonious society.'<sup>51</sup>

Although Bernice Reagon was involved with the SFCRP from its inception, she was never a driving force behind the organisation and decided that, due to her other commitments, the 1967 tour would be her last.<sup>52</sup> Her growing interest in black nationalism clashed with the interracial ethos of the SFCRP. However, that she did not immediately cut her ties with Romaine suggests that she had not adopted radical black nationalist ideas and that her SNCC-styled commitment to local organising remained undiminished. After promising to continue her work with the young people of Atlanta, Reagon organised an Afro-American Cultural Program to be made up of a history festival, a music festival and a cultural library.<sup>53</sup> Taking influence from Highlander and her experiences with SNCC and the Freedom Singers, Reagon asserted that 'there must be programs initiated in our communities that will be aimed at filling the void left by an educational system designed to ignore or distort this important phase of American history.'<sup>54</sup> The Penny Festival (so-called because of its entry fee), was eventually presented in conjunction with Negro History Week 1967. It was the direct offspring of Highlander's insistence on local folk culture as an organising tool and SNCC's focus on education as a means with which to combat oppression and promote understanding.

The popularity of the Penny Festival confirmed to Reagon that her feelings regarding the promotion of history and culture as a means to create racial understanding

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<sup>51</sup> Romaine and Reagon, Foundation Proposal p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> See 'Singers Teach History,' *Atlanta Journal* 4 June 1968 p. 8-B; Anne Romaine letter to 'Martha' 25 October 1968 p. 1. Papers of Anne Romaine, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill folder 1.

<sup>53</sup> 'Afro-American Cultural Program' n.d. c. 1966. SNCC reel 17 frame 0390. See also Bernice Reagon letter to Myles Horton, 21 Feb 1966. HREC box 65 folder 3.

<sup>54</sup> Bernice Reagon, 'Penny Festival Evaluation Report' February 1967 p. 1. HREC box 104 folder 19.

were correct, and that the community would support such work – ‘that Negro history is not only important to us but to everyone.’<sup>55</sup> Such was this success that Reagon planned it to become an annual event. However, despite such promises, Reagon served notice on the festival’s demise when she left the city in 1969.<sup>56</sup> Without her leadership and contact network, the Penny Festival was effectively doomed. Although its short term success suggests that the black community responded well to cultural initiatives, that nobody built on Reagon’s momentum indicates that such initiatives were often reliant on the vision of single leaders.

Reagon’s departure effectively left Romaine without a biracial organisation from which she could be expelled. So, in 1968 she organised a tour that featured only white performers. Romaine’s decision to do so reflects her upbringing within the largely-white Presbyterian church and her membership of the SSOC. Many SSOC activists became attuned to the relation of country music to the (white) culture of the South, not least because of their increasing interest in southern working class culture and because the SSOC was based in Nashville, home of country music’s Mecca, The Grand Ole Opry. Romaine’s decision also relates to the SSOC’s concurrent decision to begin celebrating, rather than negating, the white culture of the South, exemplified in its 1967 decision to revive its old symbol, conjoined black and white hands over the Confederate flag as part of the SSOC’s new acknowledgement of the importance of southern history in all its permutations.<sup>57</sup>

The tour was a struggle, due in part to the SFCRP’s need to be financially self-sufficient.<sup>58</sup> Although she was responding to SNCC’s call for whites to organise in white

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<sup>55</sup> Bernice Reagon letter to Conrad Browne, 12 February 1967. HREC box 104 folder 19. Also Reagon, ‘Evaluation’ p. 3. For the Penny Festival, Reagon, ‘Penny Festival Evaluation Report’; ‘The Penny Festival: Documentary of Afro-American History’ c. 1967. SNCC reel 17 frame 0391; Bernice Reagon, ‘The Penny Festival: A Report for Two Years 1967-1968’ pp. 4-5. HREC box 104 folder 19.

<sup>56</sup> Bernice Reagon, ‘Remarks’ in Reagon, ‘Report for Two Years’ p. 15; Bernice Reagon, introduction to Bruce Stewart with Lynn Shapiro, ‘Oh, What A Time,’ enclosure with SFCRP long playing record, *Oh, What A Time* 1982 p. 32. Galleys in SFCRP box 4.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchell, ‘We’ll’ pp. 265-266, 504-509, 513-517.

<sup>58</sup> Romaine, letter to Martha p. 1. There are a number of unsuccessful grant applications – e.g. Anne Romaine letter to Leslie Dunbar (Field Foundation) 17 May 1967 and reply, 6 June 1967 – in SFCRP box

communities and Reagan's incipient black nationalism, she could not resist an attempt to perform for a black college audience in Morristown, Tennessee. The audience was not best pleased, with a number complaining to Romaine that it was not right to be representing mountain culture as an all-white culture to black mountain people. To her credit, Romaine invited black performers on her next SFCRP tour, although by now, the civil rights message of the SFCRP was receiving less emphasis. With the waning of the movement and a consequent drop in audiences, Romaine was forced to retreat into white communities and gradually strip the SFCRP of its political message to concentrate on southern history and local concerns. By the early 1970s, the SFCRP was effectively an organisation committed to the preservation of white cultures, performing at folk festivals and revival meetings into the 1980s.<sup>59</sup>

For Romaine, the SFCRP was a natural extension of her civil rights work. She had become aware of the powerful role of culture and music in shaping perceptions and directed her work at challenging mistaken prejudices. By attempting to prolong the interracial dream, she made an attempt to fight a rearguard action against the growth of black nationalism and racial essentialism in the South. For Romaine, the SFCRP was the zenith of her life's work. In attempting to promote and preserve the traditional music and culture of the South, the SFCRP hoped to overcome the divisive society of the modern South. It represented another example of the power and utility of the Highlander approach to organising, and of SNCC's search for innovation in the struggle. For Anne Romaine, its great failure in the 1960s was its inability to address the tendency of white performers to emphasise the positive aspects of the poor white South and the common oppression of the working class, thus leaving the black folk tradition to deal with racism and the negative side of the South. This, for Romaine, was a failure

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3. Intriguingly, Romaine later claimed that, during this tour, 'I felt like I had truly come home.' Romaine, 'Southern Folk Cultural' p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Romaine, 'Southern Folk Cultural' pp. 4-5; 'Times Are Changing – Slowly – for Folk Revival Project' *The Tennessean* 15 July 1979 p. 2-F. SFCRP box 12.

compounded by the decision of many black performers to concentrate on the black community in the wake of Black Power.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, the failure of the SFCRP was its timing. By 1966, black audiences were growing less interested in white culture and were exploring their own heritage at the expense of their common bonds with white Americans. The SFCRP was not able to adjust to this new racial sensibility and found itself swimming against the tide of history. Its failure suggests that class-based organising was also unsustainable in the later years of the 1960s and its ultimate depoliticisation reflects much on the attitude of many previously “friendly” whites who became alienated from a movement that was urging them to look into their own psyche.

## **Conclusion**

Although Highlander played a reduced role in the civil rights movement following the transfer of the CEP to the SCLC, its influence remained important. Highlander’s commitment to folk culture is easily discerned in the folk tours of the SFCRP and, although Bernice Johnson Reagon became influenced by black nationalist thought, she remained faithful to the spirit of freedom singing. Anne Romaine took Guy Carawan’s blueprint for folk festivals and bravely tried to spread an awareness of the bonds that tied black and white southerners together.

Despite its ultimate failure, the SFCRP was a notable attempt to emphasise the biracial tradition of southern protest. It establishes the continuing influence of Highlander’s organising style and suggests that folk culture remained important to a number of southern organisers. SSOC leader Gene Guerrero recalls that the festival was ‘one of the most productive things SSOC did.’<sup>61</sup> In splitting the SFCRP from SSOC, Romaine and Reagon deprived the latter of its only successful interracial project.

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<sup>60</sup> Anne Romaine quoted in Bernice Reagon, introduction to Stewart with Shapiro ‘Oh, What A Time’ pp. 31-32.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchell, ‘We’ll’ p. 264.

Ironically, they soon discovered that they were not wholly convinced by the SFCRP's interracial outlook and went their separate ways, Reagon into more explicitly black cultural organising and Romaine into white cultural revivals. Nevertheless, the SFCRP remains significant. In an atmosphere tainted with mistrust on both sides of the racial divide, it suggests that biracial culture was of little use in the Black Power era, particularly when firebrands such as Stokely Carmichael were calling for African Americans to reclaim black history and culture from 'the cultural terrorism and depredation of self-justifying white guilt.'<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, the SFCRP was paralysed by the political whirlwind that surrounded it. Trying to stress brotherhood and the intrinsic value of white culture to an audience that had recently witnessed the call for Black Power was always going to be an uphill battle. That the focus of the civil rights movement had moved north also hindered the work of the SFCRP, leading it to be virtually ignored by the media. Nevertheless, the SFCRP proves that the cultural impulse that developed from Highlander and the civil rights movement was not limited to black organisers. That it failed is not simple proof that cultural organising was not viable – more that Romaine's naïveté and idealism were out of step with the hard-bitten *zeitgeist*. Reagon states that she encountered a great deal of success when she presented her Penny Festival to the people of Atlanta, whereas Romaine's idealistic attempt to fuse black and white cultural traditions collapsed. Her endeavour to bring white culture to the black community was, if not foolish, then certainly ill-advised and insensitive. However, Reagon and Romaine's careers both suggest that civil rights activists retained a faith in bringing culture to the core of the movement.

Highlander's involvement in Resurrection City also proves that cultural organising retained value in the late 1960s. That participants regarded the Highlander programmes as one of the few successes of the PPC indicates the continuing viability of Highlander's style. Despite this, the SCLC remained ambivalent about utilising culture as a political weapon. It continued to show commitment to the CEP, although declining

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<sup>62</sup> Stokely Carmichael, 'Toward Black Liberation' in Minor (ed.), *Stokely* p. 32.

foundation support indicates that the project was coming to the end of its natural life. The SCLC hierarchy remained fully convinced that their movement, if it was to have a culture, was to be firmly wedded to Christianity. As Andrew Young stressed, the church *was* black culture. However, by 1967, the SCLC was aware that its constituency was growing older and it was missing out on a new generation of African Americans who were more responsive to messages of black pride and racial solidarity. Hence it tried to woo black youth through its acknowledgement that black was beautiful and by its attempt to jump on the soul music bandwagon. Martin Luther King was also coming to the conclusion that the movement was becoming increasingly black in outlook and constituency. Indeed, during the planning of the PPC, King talked of the value of African American culture to the freedom struggle, asserting that 'Shakespeare, Euripides and Aristophanes are not the only poets that have lived... we're going to let our children know about Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.'<sup>63</sup> His later speeches and writing suggest that he was trying to address issues of black pride and black consciousness, although again, Christianity reigned supreme.

The experience of integrationist cultural organising in this period must be interpreted within the context of Black Power. This placed pressure on adherents of integration, not least through the exclusive and almost aggressive celebration of black culture. The inclusiveness of integration was seen by many Black Power activists as a weak paternalist answer to the race problem that did nothing to address the issue of identity within the black community. Although Highlander and the SCLC continued to insist that integration was the ultimate goal of the movement, both encountered problems when attempting to extend this to the cultural sphere. Where Anne Romaine insisted that biracial culture could unify the South, Bernice Reagon concluded that such an appeal was doomed to failure. When the SCLC finally came to terms with the power of culture, it relied on a simple and somewhat opportunist 'Black Is Beautiful' message, rather than an appeal to biracial cultural understanding. This did little to endear the

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<sup>63</sup> King quoted in Cone, *Martin & Malcolm* p. 230.



SCLC to Black Power activists, not least because it was not matched by the creation of a new generation of SCLC leaders. The “old guard” were strongly identified with the gradualism of the early 1960s movement and their insistence that revolution was not necessary did nothing to convince younger activists that they were changing. Highlander’s success at Resurrection City must similarly be interpreted within the context of the failure of the PPC to create a multiracial army of the poor. Highlander’s was a minor victory in a much larger defeat. Resurrection City also signalled Highlander’s final involvement with the civil rights movement, as its staff took a greater interest in addressing the issues that faced the Appalachian poor in the late twentieth century. Whilst elements within the movement retained hope that integration was possible, the SFCRP and the SCLC’s experience of this period suggests that the cultural politics of the 1965 to 1969 period rendered such a goal largely illusory.

## 7.

### **Addressing New Challenges: SNCC and CORE's relationship with African American culture, 1965-1969**

The 1964 Summer Project brought the issue of culture to the centre of the civil rights movement. The response of CORE and SNCC to 1964 and the rise of urban unrest suggests that African American culture was becoming a central concern of the movement and its constituency. As a result of the successes of the freedom schools, SNCC concluded that education – specifically education in African American issues – was crucial to the viability and longevity of the movement. Even as the organisation became more didactic, it stressed the value of education to the progression of the freedom struggle. Its initiatives between 1965 and 1969 reflect the importance of Freedom Summer to the movement's development. Still reeling from its betrayal by the Democratic Party in Atlantic City, SNCC took increasing sustenance from its links with Africa and looked towards extending the freedom schools to any location that could afford to sustain such a project. CORE also attempted to incorporate the concept behind the freedom schools into its work and tried to institute schools in northern inner cities.

During this period, the growing influence of CORE's radical chapters in its inner city heartland compelled it to embrace black nationalism. Coupled with the organisation's perennial financial shortcomings, CORE's interest in developing a black nationalist identity ensured that community centres and freedom schools did not become a high priority. Many of its programmes utilised African American culture to broaden

their remit but deferred to black capitalist proposals in order to boost CORE's revenue. This ambivalence was at the heart of CORE's failure in the late 1960s and was replicated at the leadership level. In this respect, CORE's Black Power experience typifies the troubled relationship between black radicalism, culture and capitalism in the late 1960s. James Farmer and Floyd McKissick concluded that culture was a useful adjunct of the movement and began to push CORE towards action in this sphere but took few bold steps. Before the election of Roy Innis as National Director, the organisation was beginning to embrace elements of cultural nationalist thought, although this was firmly within a black capitalist framework, suggesting that CORE's interest in black culture was mitigated by financial considerations.

## CORE

Reflecting the growing influence of SNCC, field attitudes towards CORE's programme in the South were changing in 1965. Richard Jewett, for example, cited the 'new-found willingness of local Mississippi Negroes to speak up for themselves' as the most significant outgrowth of the work in the state during 1964.<sup>1</sup> CORE also focused on the need to use 'every program and activity as an instrument of education' to ensure the success of its plans and talked of developing a 'psychology of equality' in the South.<sup>2</sup> By 1965, elements of CORE in the South were echoing SNCC's promise to 'destroy the traditional concept of education.'<sup>3</sup> 'Our role,' argued CORE's Southern Regional

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Jewett, 'Mississippi Field Report' 19 January 1965 p. 1. Congress of Racial Equality papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) series 4 box 2 folder 5. Hereafter cited as CORE. George Wiley's proposals regarding the organic development of civil rights programmes followed SNCC policy almost to the letter. George Wiley, memo re: 'Southern Staff Work Shop, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 21-23' 2 February 1965. CORE series 5 box 13 folder 1. James McCain urged CORE to move into community organising to develop local leaders. James T. McCain, 'Registration Report for August 1965' Floyd B. McKissick papers, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill folder 6928. Hereafter cited as McKP.

<sup>2</sup> First quote, Louisiana CORE, 'Summer Project Direction' c. April 1965 p. 2. McKP folder 6953. Second quote, Richard Haley, 'CORE in the South' 28 January 1965 p. 1. McKP folder 6957. Also see Ronnie M. Moore, 'Field Report' 19 January 1965, McKP folder 6958. 'CORE Southern Workshops 1965' January 1965. Alan Gartner papers, SHSW box 1 folder 14. Hereafter cited as AGP. Jewett, 'Mississippi Field Report.'

<sup>3</sup> See Lon Clay Hill, 'Freedom Schools for New Orleans, Louisiana' 28 May 1965. CORE Southern Regional Office papers, SHSW series 1 box 5 folder 7. Hereafter cited as CORE-SRO. Quote 'CORE

Office, 'is not to lead, or to "do for," but to share what knowledge and skills we have gained.'<sup>4</sup> Thus the community centre and, if affordable, the freedom school would play an important role in unifying the community through educational initiatives. Similarly, the Northern Regional Action Council took influence from SNCC's view of the relationship between leadership and the masses, asserting that, 'in working with the community, we should not worry about what the community wants because the community know what they want.'<sup>5</sup>

By 1965, CORE was becoming ever more influenced by SNCC's technique of becoming a catalyst for community organising and developing indigenous leaders. For James Farmer, this technique could be the precursor to effective political power. 'We must engage in a dialogue with that community,' he intoned at CORE's annual convention. 'The indigenous people of a community know their hurts, their needs and their problems ... we must be prepared to listen... The decisions, however, must rest with the people of a community.'<sup>6</sup> Farmer noted that some communities desired cultural activities, and implored CORE activists not to redirect the attention of the people, for they knew what they wanted. Community centres would, after all, be run by the community and associated with local people, rather than the sponsoring organisation. Part of CORE's failure in the 1960s therefore must have been the didactic method of CORE organising. To this end, the 1965 convention proposed to establish 12

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Summer Project Orientation – Educational Program Workshop' June 1965 p. 1. CORE-SRO series 2 box 11 folder 8. The latter document approvingly quotes Staughton Lynd on p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> CORE Southern Regional Office, 'Outline of Southern Regional Program for summer 1965' 9 April 1965 p. 1. McKP folder 6961. Steve Miller, 'Monroe – At the End of the Summer Project 1965' 24 August 1965 emphasises the development of local leadership. Papers of CORE Monroe, Louisiana chapter, SHSW box 3 folder 2.

<sup>5</sup> Report of CORE Northern Regional Action Council meeting, 23-24 January 1965 p. 2. McKP folder 6969. Brooklyn CORE noted that projects had to be attuned to the interests of local people. Imported Portuguese sardines made with Angolan slave labour were, for the chapter, 'surely reprehensible,' but was this the best focus of a boycott in Bedford-Stuyvestant? Brooklyn CORE, 'Developing Good Community Projects' n.d. p. 1. CORE Brooklyn chapter papers, SHSW box 1 folder 1. Hereafter cited as CORE Brooklyn.

<sup>6</sup> James Farmer, 'Annual Report to the National CORE Convention' 1 July 1965 pp. 4-5. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 4.

community centres in northern inner cities.<sup>7</sup> Many of the themes explored in Farmer's speech, and the 1965 convention as a whole – local initiatives replacing organisational initiatives, development of and dependence on local activists, and achieving political power through local organising and independent political action – were all explored by SNCC during 1964. SNCC's 1964 Summer Project and the MFDP were the models on which Farmer hoped CORE could base its new direction.<sup>8</sup> Although he made no mention of creating freedom schools, the use of community centres as a focal point for the community's political and cultural activities was an inspiration for his plans.

Farmer promised that 'CORE, the cutting edge of the old battles, will now become the sword's point of the new thrust!'<sup>9</sup> He urged CORE to press ahead with a mooted Cultural Action Department, arguing that it would be more of a propaganda wing, striving to address the issue of black identity in the media and arts, than an educational initiative. Thus it would work in tandem with CORE's public relations work and a new Education Action Department that would pressure the American education system.<sup>10</sup> CORE's New Directions Committee also proposed that the organisation recognise the increasing importance of ethnic identity issues in community organisation, but declined to push for CORE to place it high on the agenda.<sup>11</sup> CORE's parlous financial state, however, ensured that these plans were never more than suggestions. The organisation was struggling to change its funding structure, hoping for greater involvement from the black community and a larger number of small contributors – a

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<sup>7</sup> 'National Convention Resolutions' July 1965 p. 1. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 4. Some CORE chapters were worried that all this talk of involving the black community might alienate many CORE staff. See, for example, Walter Riley of San Francisco CORE letter to Farmer and McKissick, 30 May 1965 which complains about the growth of black nationalist sentiment in the chapter. McKP folder 6846.

<sup>8</sup> Note, for example, Brooklyn CORE's attempt to establish a Brooklyn Freedom Democratic Movement following the creation of the MFDP. 'Brooklyn CORE – 1964-65 – A Brief Review' p. 2. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 4.

<sup>9</sup> Farmer, 'Annual Report' 1965 p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> James Farmer, 'Suggested Guidelines for Future Organizational Expansion' 3 April 1965. AGP box 1 folder 4.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the New Directions Committee, CORE 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention minutes p. 40. The Meier-Rudwick Collection of CORE papers box 2 folder 1. Hereafter cited as Meier-Rudwick collection. The motion passed without unanimous backing.

reflection of the decline in support from CORE's wealthy white constituency.<sup>12</sup> The organisation could not afford to underwrite such ambitious schemes and so Farmer's four-pronged thrust was halved, as CORE continued to focus on political and economic, rather than cultural and educational, issues.

Although seemingly a critical turning point in the organisation's history, CORE's 1965 convention, titled 'The Negro Ghetto: An Awakening Giant,' reflected changes in the organisation that had been occurring over the previous two years. After days of intense and divisive arguments about CORE's fundamental nature and purpose, the delegates acknowledged the importance of racial and ethnic identity to the struggle and voted to commit CORE to ghetto organising, pushing CORE ever closer to an adoption of Black Power. CORE had been experimenting with a number of inner city initiatives, and had already concluded that it could develop a significant power base in these areas. In inner city Philadelphia, CORE was attempting to extend the lessons of 1964 into pre-school teaching. For Philadelphia CORE, there was overwhelming evidence that inner city children suffered a form of cultural deprivation from a lack of pre-school education. Using a minimum number of teachers and as many local parents as could be enticed, the programme hoped to address the issue of self-identity through interaction and play.<sup>13</sup> The benefits to the community at large were easily discernible, both in terms of the cultural organising and in the development of community bonds.

For some in CORE, inner city organising was doomed to failure without cultural activities. Members of New Haven CORE proposed in June 1965 that CORE should base its inner city programmes around social and recreational activities. Thus basketball clubs, for example, could be used to channel youth energy into community organising. CORE staff, rather than simply being organisers, would first become coaches or

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<sup>12</sup> See James Farmer, comments at CORE news conference, Durham, North Carolina, 30 June 1965 transcript p. 1. CORE series 4 box 1 folder 4. Also various comments in minutes of 'Problems Facing CORE' discussion, CORE 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention minutes pp. 5-6. Meier-Rudwick collection box 2 folder 1. Also James Farmer memo, 30 December 1964. McKP folder 6774.

<sup>13</sup> James O. Williams, Philadelphia CORE, letter to Floyd McKissick, 14 December 1964, Philadelphia CORE, 'Description of Proposed "Little Schools" Movement for North Philadelphia' c.1964. McKP folder 6916.

instructors.<sup>14</sup> Their identity would be subtly transformed, affording them a greater opportunity to work with young people who might have been suspicious of political organisers. This process also suggests that, for inner city youth, black culture – in this case, basketball – was more relevant than the freedom movement. CORE thus acknowledged that it needed to utilise culture to mobilise disaffected African Americans.

Chicago CORE had a more ambiguous experience of using culture as a weapon. Although its operations focused on political demonstrations, provisions were made for educational activities and three self-sufficient freedom centres were to become the focus for more varied activities as the community became more involved.<sup>15</sup> However, internal dissent caused two to close in spring 1965, which contributed to CORE's gradual decline in the city. The remaining freedom centre, in Chicago's south side, continued to present recreational and cultural classes and planned to expand its black history curriculum to involve adults as well as schoolchildren, but was forced to rein in its plans.<sup>16</sup> Later in 1965, as part of its campaign to broaden the parameters of protest in the city, Chicago CORE sponsored an opera and a performance of a new freedom song, but these events did not stall its decline, caused in part by the increasing importance of Chicago's Coordinating Council of Community Organizations.<sup>17</sup> That the opera performance failed also relates to the economic profile of CORE's northern supporters. Few working-class people, white or black, were interested in opera. Coupled with the local increase in black nationalist sentiment, it seems surprising that Chicago CORE

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<sup>14</sup> Blyden Jackson, John Burke, Don Petty memo re: 'Proposals to give CORE an effective organizational base in the urban black community' 22 June 1965. CORE series 4 box 2 folder 5.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Gore, memo re 'Chicago' 27 January 1965. McKP folder 6949.

<sup>16</sup> 'Chicago CORE Information Service Newsletter' March 1965. Faith Rich papers, SHSW box 1 folder 1. A report from later in the year blames lack of materials and the pressures of urban organising for the failure to spread the history classes. Beth Wise, 'Report From the Southside CORE Freedom Center' August 1965 p. 5. Faith Rich papers box 1 folder 10. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 360.

<sup>17</sup> CORE 'Emergency Fund Raising Bulletin #2' 22 July 1965. McKP folder 6949. Also James R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) pp. 25, 29, 198.

attempted to use a fusion of high and integrationist culture to revive itself. That it failed was less surprising.

By 1966, the predominantly black CORE saw Black Power as the only means through which the psychological aspects of the freedom struggle could be addressed. As one activist noticed, black nationalism was well-suited to CORE's new focus on community organising. Since it did not involve much interaction with the white power structure, a task that was normally reserved for white or integrationist CORE members, black nationalists in CORE saw little reason to retain white involvement in the organisation.<sup>18</sup> This also fed into CORE's habitual financial worries, as donations from white supporters dwindled further with the black community failing to take up the slack, pushing the organisation towards foundation support. Its 1966 convention resolved to adopt Black Power as the organisation's ethos. CORE asserted that 'black consciousness, the honest recognition of beauty of blackness, an understanding of African history and an awareness of Negro culture and history within the American heritage are essential,' to the creation of a multiracial society.<sup>19</sup> This statement derived in part from CORE's worry that it was not attracting the black community to its campaign. Thus, when it stated that the only significant mass movements of black people in the United States were the Black Muslims and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, it was not only renouncing the NAACP, but was placing itself within the separatist African American tradition. In 1965, the convention reaffirmed its commitment to nonviolence but, given its relationship with the Deacons for Defense in Louisiana, chose not to criticise others for using violence in self-defence.<sup>20</sup> By 1966 CORE accepted that nonviolence and self-defence were not contradictory and had concluded that self-defence was a 'natural and inalienable right.'

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymous CORE activist cited in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* p. 380.

<sup>19</sup> CORE, '1966 Convention Resolutions' p. 1. McKP folder 6842.

<sup>20</sup> 'Racial Integration Through Assimilation and Moral Suasion vs. Racial Co-Existence Through Black Power' resolutions adopted at CORE 1966 National Convention p. 1. McKP folder 7007.



Arnold Williams' nonviolence with a vengeance had come to pass.<sup>21</sup> James Farmer's successor, Floyd McKissick, argued that CORE's new direction reflected this attitude, namely that the African American demanded true equality, 'and that does not mean integration all the time. He wants his self-identity. He wants his culture.'<sup>22</sup> In line with this (gendered) direction, McKissick announced that CORE's national office would be moving into the centre of Harlem. This move had symbolic and financial benefits: proving CORE's commitment to inner city organising saved nearly \$1,000 per month in rent, a necessary saving, given CORE's worrisome financial situation.<sup>23</sup>

CORE's sponsorship of the Target City Youth Program in inner city Baltimore gave the organisation a new opportunity to assert itself in the North. Baltimore CORE began large-scale ghetto organising in 1965, stressing that CORE focus on the psychological scars of inner city life.<sup>24</sup> After spending much of 1966 focusing on demonstrations against segregation and housing, the project experimented with work training programmes and freedom schools. In offering young people (often those with criminal records) the chance to gain remedial work skills and occupational training, the Target City programme hoped to increase black inner city employment and raise the self-confidence and pride of local people.<sup>25</sup> As with SNCC's 1964 Summer Project plan to train people in manual skills, Target City took on a Washingtonian idea to offer vocational skills to those individuals whose academic careers had reached a dead end. Thus it hoped to forge youngsters into service station managers and automotive specialists. Nearly half of Baltimore's first trainees found employment within five months of graduation.<sup>26</sup> The Department of Labor funded this idea to keep ghetto youths

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<sup>21</sup> '1966 Convention Resolutions' p. 1. For Williams, see chapter 2 fn. 75, above.

<sup>22</sup> McKissick quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* p. 409.

<sup>23</sup> Floyd B. McKissick, memo re: 'national office' 7 September 1966. McKP folder 7033c.

<sup>24</sup> Baltimore CORE, 'Preface'; 'Rationale for Request of Financial Assistance' c. 1965. McKP folder 6952.

<sup>25</sup> See CORE pamphlet, 'Breaking the Noose' McKP folder 7028. 'CORE's "Target City" Project in Baltimore Now Hailed as Moderate as it Nears 2d Year' *New York Times* 16 April 1967 p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> See 'Target City 5<sup>th</sup> Report – July 1 through August 31, 1967'; Milton Holmes, Project Co-ordinator, Target City Youth Program, letter to Floyd McKissick, 19 September 1967. Both McKP folder 6864.

working and firmly within the working class. Thus, the glass ceiling that hovered over inner city blacks would be maintained and youths would be kept off the streets and away from anti-social activities in the meantime.

A similar Target City was established in Cleveland, and was considered such a success that it was planned to run deep into 1969.<sup>27</sup> A plan to extend capital ownership to inner city people was also instituted in order to spread the concept of individual capitalism. Thus, those in the ghetto would also be able to accumulate capital and hence economic power.<sup>28</sup> The plans were a combination of a SNCC-influenced cultural nationalist thrust and a proto-Reaganite adoption of trickle-down economics. An African cultural centre was to address the cultural needs of black individuals and become the centre for a project to spread Swahili in the community. In a 1968 effort to develop local leaders, voter education classes stressed the value of black history and African heritage.<sup>29</sup> However, the centre would also be part of an import-export firm specialising in African clothing and artefacts. A travel agency would offer people the chance to experience the motherland for themselves and a 'socio-environmental multi-disciplinary design concept team' would offer their services as well.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the emphasis on cultural enrichment was tempered by the knowledge that money could be made out of it. It would perhaps be too cynical to suggest that CORE hoped to create Pan-Africanist consumers through its language and history classes, but there remains a curious link between the Cleveland educational programme and its economic aims.

Other black capitalist CORE proposals included a 1967 suggestion by Brooklyn CORE Chair Ollie Leeds that CORE establish credit unions in areas of activity

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<sup>27</sup> See 'CORE Target City Cleveland Project Funding Proposal' 29 May 1968. McKP folder 6870. The Cleveland project was awarded a \$175,000 by the Ford Foundation in July 1967. Ford Foundation press release, 14 July 1967. McKP folder 6777.

<sup>28</sup> See 'An Open Application for Funding Grants for CORE Enterprise Corporation Inc.' n.d. McKP folder 7030b. Also Mike Culbert, 'CORE, "Universal Capitalism" Join Hands in Cleveland Project' *Berkeley Daily Gazette* 15 April 1968. McKP folder 7026.

<sup>29</sup> Wilfred Ussery, memo re 'Audio-visual Swahili Black History Document' 16 February 1968. McKP folder 6780. 'Cleveland CORE Project Denounced and Lauded' *New York Times* 24 February 1968. McKP folder 7018.

<sup>30</sup> 'Open Application' p. 20.

alongside 'CORE Stores' which would house coffee bars and the all-important bookshop-cum-reading room. According to Leeds, CORE could also expand into publishing and the production of clothing and stationery. Although Leeds argued that these projects would benefit the community in many ways and should offer good value for money, his argument that both should be at least self-sustaining and ideally profit-making, suggests that capitalism (and CORE's financial situation) was elevated above the cultural benefits. As he put it, 'going into business means one of two things. Making money or losing it.'<sup>31</sup> Brooklyn CORE also hoped to involve local merchants in its youth training schemes, urging them to train young people in the skills needed to open their own commercial enterprises. The chapter furthermore wanted these merchants to underwrite a reading programme in Bedford-Stuyvesant and a performing arts centre in the neighbourhood.<sup>32</sup> These exercises in the development of black capitalism tempered with a mild dose of cultural nationalism were arguably CORE's greatest successes in these years, allowing Floyd McKissick to push the organisation towards a public acceptance of the concept of black capitalism. The Target Cities certainly gave CORE a unique identity in the inner cities, and offered the chance for the organisation to develop a new philosophy. They also suggest that CORE's relationship with black capitalism was more nuanced than simply an acceptance of individualism and included an appreciation of the unique value of black culture.

CORE's ramshackle 1967 Oakland convention, attended by only 100 official delegates, dropped the organisation's multiracial identity in favour of committing itself to 'Black Power for Black People.'<sup>33</sup> The overtly cultural nationalist flavour of the conference was more a reflection of the location of the conference than an indication of the organisation's philosophical stance. Bay Area cultural nationalism was vibrant, as exemplified in Amiri Baraka's association with the Black House, a meeting place for

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<sup>31</sup> Ollie Leeds, 'Implementing Black Power: A CORE Approach' February 1967 pp. 8-9, quote p. 9. Meier-Rudwick collection box 2 folder 8.

<sup>32</sup> Brooklyn CORE, 'Youth Program Proposals' March 1967 p. 3. CORE Brooklyn box 1 folder 9.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth E. Marshall, CORE 1967 National Convention Log, July 1967 p. 7. Meier-Rudwick collection box 2 folder 2.

black intellectuals and cultural gurus in San Francisco.<sup>34</sup> Ron Karenga addressed the convention and various Us members were in attendance, taking responsibility for escorting various Black Power dignitaries, including Muhammad Ali and Dick Gregory, around the conference. Baraka was also present, and a selection of his one-act plays were presented, according to one observer in a 'rather desultory and haphazard manner.'<sup>35</sup> At this point, CORE's membership was dwindling and a hardline black separatist faction was attempting to unseat the organisation's leadership. Some members even advocated the dismantling of CORE's structure and its reorientation as a SNCC-styled organisation of organisers.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore no surprise that the convention was dominated by outside influences that pushed CORE towards a cultural nationalist policy that the organisation was never comfortable with.

To McKissick, black capitalism was more than manual jobs and convenience stores; it was central to Black Power. He envisaged large black corporations and massive black economic power as the base from which equality could rise, destroying the oligarchy of American capitalism (but not capitalism itself) in the process. Hence his assertion that part of the American economy should be turned over to the black community and his devotion to Soul City, North Carolina.<sup>37</sup> This city would be the focal point for the development of black urban technological skills in the Piedmont area, and would be open to all races.<sup>38</sup> McKissick's slightly self-serving concept stressed that the

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<sup>34</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, revised edition 1997) p. 351. At the time, the Black Panther Party was primarily concerned trying to attract support from UC-Berkeley students and policing the Oakland police.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 355; quote Marshall, 1967 Convention Log p. 5. Karenga was also a keynote speaker at the 1968 convention. CORE 1968 Convention schedule. McKP folder 6776.

<sup>36</sup> Meier and Rudwick, *CORE* p. 422; Marshall, 1967 Convention Log pp. 1-3 for factional struggles.

<sup>37</sup> Floyd B. McKissick, *Three-Fifths of a Man* (London: Macmillan, 1969) pp. 33, 36, 152-153. For his concept of black corporations, Floyd McKissick, letter to Carl Pace, 3 April 1969. McKP folder 5548.

<sup>38</sup> McKissick Enterprises press release, 13 January 1969. McKP folder 6255. Floyd McKissick, letter to Mrs Shirley E. Allen 10 February 1969; Allen letter to McKissick, 19 January 1969. McKP folder 5553. Allen, a white divorcee, had recently fallen in love with a black man and wished to move to Soul City, which was to be located on part of an old plantation in the two-thirds black Warren County, near the North Carolina-Virginia border. For McKissick's embryonic ideas, North Carolina Leadership Conference on Economic Development, 'A Proposal to the Office of Economic Opportunity for a Planning and Demonstration Grant' October-December 1965. McKP folder 6592. For population projection 'What Is Soul City?' brochure n.d. p. 2. McKP folder 5550.

city would 'inspire Black men everywhere... nurture Black culture, Black leadership and Black pride,' and become a focal point for the national black community.<sup>39</sup> Cultural services would be provided along with ample recreational provisions and religious facilities. McKissick also hoped to restore buildings of historical interest – ironically, mostly old plantation houses – in order to emphasise Soul City's roots.<sup>40</sup> Despite these sops to the cultural nationalists and his insistence that his offices contained black *objets d'art*, McKissick's worldview was shaped by economics – after all, Soul City was planned to make a profit. For him, although he occasionally protested that he was trying to create a form of black socialism, the worldwide freedom struggle was centred on economic power, and only economic power could solve the race problem in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

CORE's relationship with black capitalism and cultural nationalism reveals the awkward relationship that both aspects of Black Power ideology had with the black community. Although cultural nationalism was psychologically viable, it could not fund an organisational drive. Black capitalism was less attractive to many organisers, particularly the left wing, but it attracted foundation and government funds that ensured organisational survival. Thus CORE needed such initiatives as the Target City projects in Cleveland and Baltimore in spite of criticism from some within the organisation that they simply served to confirm CORE's reliance on white money.<sup>42</sup> CORE also needed to stress that the programmes would address the psychological issues pertinent to young African Americans, in order to suggest that it was subverting white American ideals. CORE's faltering attempts to redefine itself during the Black Power years simply served to confirm the strengths of SNCC's activism in 1964. CORE continued to stress the

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<sup>39</sup> McKissick Enterprises press release, 12 February 1969. McKP folder 6255.

<sup>40</sup> Soul City memo 9 October 1969 pp. 3-5. McKP folder 5530. For history of the area on which Soul City was to be built, "'Soul City' Stirs Its Future Neighbors' *Washington Post* 26 January 1969 p. B2.

<sup>41</sup> 'McKissick Says Blacks Should Control Harlem' *New York Amsterdam News* 5 July 1969 p. 10 for black socialism plea. McKP folder 7019. 'McKissick is Planning "Soul City"' *Washington Post* 14 January 1969 pp. A1, A5; "'Soul City' Backers Need \$500,000' *Washington Post* 13 February 1969 p. A3 for the stress on capitalism.

<sup>42</sup> Lincoln O. Lynch, Associate National Director, memo, 26 April 1967. Meier-Rudwick collection box 2 folder 3. Marshall, 1967 Convention Log pp. 2-3 for criticism within CORE of Target City.

importance of political activity to the freedom struggle, but found itself increasingly influenced by SNCC's eclecticism and focus on holistic exercises. Even in CORE's more radical plans, such as Harlem's proposal for an independent local Board of Education, SNCC's ideas and rhetoric were apparent. Harlem CORE castigated local schools as 'a bulwark of mediocrity, a powerful instrument for perpetuating the very ills we seek to erase.'<sup>43</sup> It highlighted the pernicious effects of white schooling on black psychology in its indictment of integrated schooling in New York City and pressured for more black history classes and black faces in textbooks.<sup>44</sup> SNCC had done this in 1964. During these years CORE trod a fine line between the extremism of black nationalism and the Americanism of individualist capitalism. In failing to reconcile the two, and in its ambivalent attitude towards black culture, CORE failed to establish a new identity, lost vast numbers of its supporters, and gave a small number of ideologues the opportunity to lay claim to its leadership.

## SNCC

On 25 February 1965, SNCC announced its plans for the year ahead. Alongside ambitious proposals to lobby Congress with 2,000 students in July and hold people's conferences throughout the South, SNCC reaffirmed the validity of the lessons that it had learned during 1964. 'Many past programs are still going forward,' it asserted, 'but with greater accent on education for organization and agitation.'<sup>45</sup> The concept of the freedom schools and community centres was considered to be central to SNCC's continued development. The organisation continued to stress the importance of bringing resources into local communities and experimenting with new programmes to continue to broaden the parameters of the movement, citing the success of the Free Southern

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<sup>43</sup> New York-Harlem CORE, 'A Proposal for an Independent Board of Education for Harlem' 1 March 1967 p. 2. McKP folder 6901.

<sup>44</sup> New York-Harlem CORE, 'Independent Board' p. 1, *passim*. 'Why We Boycott for Quality Education' handbill. Both CORE Brooklyn box 2 folder 2.

<sup>45</sup> 'SNCC Programs for 1965' 23 February 1965 p. 3 Social Action Vertical File, SHSW box 47. Hereafter cited as SAVF.

Theater as a prime example of SNCC's innovation.<sup>46</sup> In addition to such programmes, SNCC continued to explore the relationship between the freedom struggle and Africa, and emphasised that African American culture was a central element of this struggle.

Following the conclusion of the Summer Project, SNCC continued to debate the legacy of the freedom schools and wonder how to fine tune their implementation. John Lewis felt that the implications of the Summer Project were crucial to the conduct of the movement and argued that the basis of the schools was to encourage students to say, 'it seems to me...' This existentialist, questioning attitude was, for Lewis, a fundamental part of SNCC's campaign in the South. Once people were transforming these words into action, SNCC's work was all but complete.<sup>47</sup> A number of SNCC initiatives set out to extend the remit of the freedom school curriculum. SNCC Arkansas set up a small number of freedom schools in 1965 using the syllabus developed for the 1964 Summer Project.<sup>48</sup> In August 1965 SNCC announced that it had published a Negro history primer designed to augment American history books that under-emphasised the role of black people in the United States – a lesson learned during the Summer Project. The 51-page book targeted at black schoolchildren began life as a colouring book in the freedom schools, but developed into a survey text of African American history following SNCC's realisation that a suitable history book was needed for people with limited reading skills. As the co-author Frank Cieciorca suggested, 'we tried to simplify the language without simplifying the ideas.'<sup>49</sup> SNCC activists in Albany, Georgia proposed extending the freedom school remit to include nursery schools. Although these schools

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 5. See also SNCC press release, 'Mississippi Summer Project: One Year Later' 25 May 1965. SAVF, SHSW box 29.

<sup>47</sup> John Lewis, statement to staff meeting February 1965 pp. 2-3. The Summer Project also influenced the New York City Council for Jobs and Freedom, who advocated cultural activities as a vitally important element of the educational thrust of its plan to organise in Harlem during 1965. 'A Proposal for Action in Harlem Through Independent Community Organization' 1965. CORE series 5 box 17 folder 4.

<sup>48</sup> See various field reports for West Helena freedom school (Phillips County), June-July 1965. SNCC Arkansas box 1 folder 15; Linda John Lewis, 'Gould "Freedom School" Primarily Teaches Pride' in *Arkansas Gazette* 27 March 1966. Reprinted by SNCC Arkansas. SNCC Arkansas box 8 folder 6 (Laura Foner papers). Also Nancy Stoller, 'Freedom School Workshop [at Highlander]' c. April 1965. SNCC Arkansas box 2 folder 1.

<sup>49</sup> SNCC press release 27 August 1965. SAVF, SHSW box 48. No copies of the book remain in the various SNCC files and collections.

were not intended to begin the teaching process, they were explicitly designed to offer a nurturing environment for pre-school children, where they could, 'gain feelings of confidence, pride, and worth in themselves.' Feelings of success and a positive self-image were central goals of the nursery in order to propel the children towards language development, concept formation and perceptual discrimination.<sup>50</sup> Upon his return to Philadelphia, John Churchville, inspired by the freedom schools, established a Freedom Library Community Project to allow the black community access to books about black people.<sup>51</sup> All these programmes relied on the involvement of the local community as teachers or leaders – a direct descendant of the CEP tradition – and utilised elements of the Summer Project curriculum.

Judy Richardson proposed that SNCC establish a residential freedom school in 1965. She hoped to invite 50 northern high school students and 50 southern students – all black – in an attempt to strengthen cultural bonds between African American youth. The school would run for two sessions, one in a northern urban setting, and one in the rural South. Richardson felt that such an exchange would help the students understand 'the essential similarity of their lives as well as the similarity of the controls on those lives... [to] strengthen the bonds between these two groups.'<sup>52</sup> She urged SNCC to make available information about Africa and black history in general. The students would take part in role plays, writing, recreation, singing and the production of film strips in order to facilitate discussion and forge working relationships. Richardson and her colleagues in the plan, Sherron Jackson and Nancy Cooper, hoped that as many of the students as possible would be housed in the ghetto 'to allow them to fully experience

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<sup>50</sup> 'Albany Georgia Nursery School: A Pilot Program for Southern Nursery Schools' n.d. pp. 3-4, quote p. 4. Although the document has no date, references to the 1964 Conference of the California Association for Nursery Education and the plans to open the school in February, suggest that the plan originated after the planning of the 1964 Summer Project. *ibid.* pp. 2, 3. Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 37 frames 0405-0406. Hereafter cited as SNCC.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew J. Countryman, 'Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971' (PhD thesis, Duke University, 1998) pp. 393-402.

<sup>52</sup> Judy Richardson memo to SNCC Executive Committee 're: Residential Freedom School' Sept 1964. SNCC reel 3 frame 0367.



the lives of their counterparts.’<sup>53</sup> Richardson’s plans indicate Highlander’s enduring influence on SNCC, even as SNCC was beginning to retreat from interracialism. Highlander always strove to demonstrate the bonds that united blacks and whites throughout the United States. In 1960, it had established an ‘Inter-Cultural Youth Project’ in an attempt to break down the cultural barriers between disparate groups of students. Forty-four students from many racial and cultural backgrounds attended the project, living, studying and playing together. For Highlander, the core of the project was, naturally, ‘a shared class experience in the arts – painting, music, literature, dramatics, and the dance.’<sup>54</sup>

The SNCC residential school took place in August 1965, a few months after Richardson had successfully established a freedom school in south west Georgia.<sup>55</sup> Richardson reported that, generally, the experiment was a success, although she confessed that some of the students from Chicago struggled to relate to their southern counterparts and that there were occasional outbreaks of civil war.<sup>56</sup> This was the only time that SNCC experimented with such a school which, in a number of respects, represents SNCC’s transitional phase. The organisation attempted to continue its work in the rural South, but drew ever closer to urban activism, discovering that its resources could not stretch to include both. Some in SNCC, such as Richardson, struggled to comprehend the lack of unity between northern and southern blacks and became drawn into the violence of northern ghettos and away from SNCC’s initial programmatic focus. The trouble between the student groups also suggested to SNCC how difficult it would be to translate the lessons of the southern movement to the North. There was no

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<sup>53</sup> ‘Prospectus for Residential Freedom School’ n.d. p. 1. SAVF, SHSW box 47. This document is attached to a memo to SNCC staff, dated 29 May 1965 from Richardson, Cooper and Jackson.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Highlander 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Report – 1960’ p. 3. Highlander Research and Education Center records, SHSW box 1 folder 7.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Southwest Georgia SNCC Newsletter’ 28 February 1965 p. 2. SNCC reel 37 frame 0352.

<sup>56</sup> Judy Richardson, report on Residential Freedom School, August 1965. SNCC reel 35 frames 0077-0082.

attempt to establish a second residential programme, suggesting that SNCC found the expense of such a project to be greater than the benefits it accrued.

By January 1965, some members of SNCC were advocating the creation of a cultural arm of the organisation. Barbara Simon suggested that this was an urgent need to ensure the creation and maintenance of a separate culture for African Americans. She hoped that a cultural arm would illustrate that culture was not synonymous with Europe and that African American culture was inextricably linked with the African continent and American colonisation. She proposed that a touring group be established to perform freedom songs for northern black audiences and that an African dance group tour SNCC projects. The dance group would be accompanied by a workshop that would emphasise the value of black history to the freedom struggle. Simon also wanted art exhibitions to tour the South and a theatre group run along similar lines as the FST to be established.<sup>57</sup> Simon's proposals were indebted to the 1964 Summer Project. Both her idea to create a new FST and her suggestion that workshops accompany the dance group are direct descendants of the freedom schools and, indeed, the FST itself.

That she explicitly desired a new Freedom Singers group to perform for black audiences indicates how black nationalism was beginning to infiltrate SNCC ranks. Simon felt that the existing Freedom Singers were too wedded to the integrationist movement to speak directly to black audiences. Her assertion that SNCC should be directing its energies toward the publication of a periodical similar in scope to *Muhammad Speaks* would most likely have alienated many moderates in SNCC. Simon also asked that she be transferred to the Atlanta office (with the commensurate financial benefits) and have the use of a car. Given that the Freedom Singers were still operating

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara Simon, 'Proposal for a Cultural Arm of SNCC' 5 January 1965, quote p. 2. SNCC Vine City Project papers, SHSW box 1 folder 8. Hereafter cited as SNCC Vine City. Incidentally, the SNCC Freedom Singers continued to tour after Bernice Reagon's departure. During the summer of 1965, they visited SNCC centres in the South with Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest, author, playwright, actor and former Freedom Rider. Boyd read poetry and selections from black literature, including works by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and himself, with the Freedom Singers performing their repertoire of freedom songs and spirituals. SNCC Press Release 'SNCC Freedom Singers and Priest-Playwright Tour South' 15 July 1965. SNCC reel 37 frame 0599.

and that there was still hope that the FST would continue to work alongside SNCC, it is unsurprising that Simon's somewhat derivative proposal was not approved. That her proposal did not come to fruition was as much to do with her financial requests and her overt black nationalism – she stated that it was time for African Americans to know their separate culture – as to SNCC's lack of interest.

During 1965 SNCC continued to grapple with the issue of its relationship with Africa. John Lewis announced that he was 'convinced more than ever before that the social, economic, and political destiny of the black people of America is inseparable from that of our black brothers of Africa.'<sup>58</sup> In October, Dona Richards and Robert Parris attended the Organization of African Unity meeting in Ghana. Richards became increasingly convinced that SNCC should involve itself with African affairs.<sup>59</sup> Richards and Parris became advocates of developing black consciousness as an influential element of the freedom struggle, through what they termed an 'African-Afro-American cultural program' that would be instituted in the South.<sup>60</sup> Richards also impatiently urged SNCC to open an African Affairs Department and offered her skills as co-ordinator. She hoped that the department could produce a regular newsletter to aid SNCC's educational programmes and that it could entice African diplomats, students and cultural groups to tour SNCC projects, perhaps developing an exchange programme in the process.<sup>61</sup> By discovering what it meant to be an African American, Richards felt that blacks could find the strength to unite and advance. For her, the lessons of the SNCC trip to Africa in 1964 were a panacea for African Americans. 'Those of us who went to Guinea were proud and felt a kind of belonging that most of us had never felt in this country,' she wrote. 'We can now gain strength from an identification with the

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<sup>58</sup> John Lewis, statement to SNCC staff meeting, February 1965 p. 1. SAVF, SHSW box 47.

<sup>59</sup> Dona Richards and Bob Moses memo to 'SNCC-people' 10 October 1965. Howard Zinn papers, SHSW box 2 folder 13. Hereafter cited as ZP.

<sup>60</sup> Janet Jemmot, Bob Parris, Dona Richards, Doug Harris, Tina Harris, 'Black Consciousness' memo n.d. p. 3. SNCC Arkansas Project papers, SHSW box 7 folder 2. Hereafter cited as SNCC Arkansas. The memo makes reference to Parris and Richards' visit to Africa 'a few months ago.'

<sup>61</sup> Dona Richards, memo re: 'A SNCC African Project' post September 1965 pp. 1-2. ZP box 2 folder 11. See also Dona Richards, memo II – 'Report on the beginnings of the African Project' n.d. ZP box 2 folder 13.

African movement.’<sup>62</sup> For Richards, the psychological effects of involvement in the movement could also be solved by focusing on the links with Africa. Since Africans were not obsessed with the issue of integration – ‘a term which has become, for us, meaningless’ – identification with Africa would reveal the universal problems that beset freedom movements.<sup>63</sup> The African Department would also do much to further SNCC’s involvement in the worldwide struggle for human rights, suggesting that Malcolm X’s plan to appeal to the United Nations was also becoming influential in SNCC circles. SNCC was active in both New York City and Washington, D.C., which were perfect sites for the African Department, but neither could devote time or money to such an undertaking. Nor was SNCC able to spare extra staff to ensure that contacts were maintained with useful agencies and individuals. The African Department became subsumed within SNCC’s Washington office which co-ordinated SNCC’s international publicity alongside attempting to boost SNCC’s profile in the nation’s capital, organising local initiatives and battling with SNCC’s funding crisis.

Stokely Carmichael was fully convinced of the value of culture to liberation movements, an attitude that developed primarily during 1964.<sup>64</sup> Carmichael echoed SNCC’s insistence that culture and history were crucial elements of the struggle.<sup>65</sup> He was also aware of the psychological effects of white culture on African Americans. The Tarzan films of his youth were pertinent examples of the means through which white culture indoctrinated blacks to develop an instinctive love for the white man at the expense of self-identification: not for nothing were the tribesmen of the jungle depicted as savages, with the nominal hero the last remnant of white society.<sup>66</sup> Cultural integrity

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<sup>62</sup> Richards, ‘SNCC African’ p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> See Jane Stembridge, ‘Notes About a Class’ in Ethel N. Minor (ed.), *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Vintage, 1971) pp. 3-8.

<sup>65</sup> Stokely Carmichael, ‘Toward Black Liberation’ September 1966, *ibid.* p. 32. Also Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) pp. 49-53.

<sup>66</sup> Stokely Carmichael, ‘Power and Racism’ in Minor (ed.), *Stokely* pp. 26-27. Remember that Tarzan recreated the nuclear family with Jane, Boy and Cheetah in their tree hut. Also Stokely Carmichael,

was also a key element of community for Carmichael. For him, identity politics were crucial to the success of the freedom struggle – thus his growing racial essentialism. ‘Color and culture were, and are, key in our oppression,’ he argued, ‘therefore our analysis of history and our economic analysis are rooted in these concepts.’<sup>67</sup> To the black students of Morgan State College, Baltimore, he challenged, ‘can you understand your culture?’<sup>68</sup> Those without this cultural knowledge were of no use to the revolution.

For Bill Ware of SNCC’s Atlanta Project, the need for freedom schools was simple: America lied to its black children and these lies created a ‘crippling scar’ of inferiority on the black psyche.<sup>69</sup> The liberating atmosphere of the freedom schools, which encouraged individual thought, would be an ideal corrective. Some of Ware’s colleagues suggested that the freedom schools be run in conjunction with the SCLC, an idea immediately dismissed by Ware who was more concerned with emphasising the black nationalist element of the schools. As in the Mississippi schools, the instruction in black history, culture and pride was to be directly linked with the students’ everyday lives and, it was hoped, would expand into a full-scale cultural programme.<sup>70</sup> Although not yet fully committed to black separatism, the Atlanta Project rejected the idea that teachers could be imported into the community, and so proposed that the schools’ staff be recruited from Atlanta’s student population. This would also help to forge greater community bonds. A fundraising letter was distributed soon after the meeting, requesting donations of books for the schools – the list attached was a 1963 SNCC list, featuring many of the books used in the 1964 Summer Project, again suggesting that the

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‘What We Want’ *The Movement* November 1966 in Clayborne Carson and the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project (eds.), *The Movement 1964-1970* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) p. 169.

<sup>67</sup> Stokely Carmichael, ‘The Dialectics of Liberation’ speech at the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation, London, July 1967 in Minor (ed.), *Stokely* p. 89.

<sup>68</sup> Stokely Carmichael, ‘At Morgan State’ January 1967 *ibid.* p. 75.

<sup>69</sup> Bill Ware, ‘Freedom Schools: the reason why’ 25 April 1966 p. 1. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 12.

<sup>70</sup> Transcript of Atlanta Project meeting, 25 April 1966 pp. 3-4, 6. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 12. Liberation schools were also planned in Washington. ‘Liberation Schools’; ‘Curriculum – Program for Black Survival’; ‘Purpose of Liberation School’; Liberation School Seminar Topics’ n.d. SNCC reel 55 frames 1191, 1192, 1196. The original folder containing these documents is from the Washington Office files and is dated 1965-1968.

Atlanta Project took influence from SNCC's defining moment.<sup>71</sup> This was, however, not an Atlanta Project innovation: during April 1965, COFO staff concluded that white teachers should no longer be used in Mississippi freedom schools, feeling that they might perpetuate the culture of black dependency and supposed white superiority.<sup>72</sup>

The Atlanta Project is famous in SNCC history for its rejection of white involvement. The Atlanta group felt that whites could not relate to the cultural aspects of black society and reject their (sometimes unconscious) paternalism and tendency to assume leadership roles. Misconceptions of black inferiority and interracial sexual relations (in particular the often exoticised relationship between white women and black men) suggested that they did not fully appreciate the humanity of black people. Finally, unwillingness to deal with the roots of racism in the white community further ensured that true unity was unattainable. Much of this reasoning came from the Atlanta Project's reading of African American history that emphasised the culture and identity of transplanted Africans. Within this view of history, the 1964 Summer Project was a central event when whites took control at the expense of the development of the black community.<sup>73</sup> Given this psychological baggage, the collective power even of white liberals had pernicious effects on the black community and on black organising. In order to achieve complete freedom, black-only projects and an all-black SNCC needed to be created. Following from this, the Atlanta Project cried, 'Black people must re-evaluate our history, our ideas of self, the world, Africa and her contributions to this society and to the world.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Simmons letter and enclosure to anonymous donors, 15 May 1966. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 12.

<sup>72</sup> Atlanta Project, 'The Necessity for Southern Urban Organizing' spring 1966 p. 5. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 8. Minutes of 5<sup>th</sup> District COFO staff meeting, 14-17 April 1965 pp. 11-15. SAVF, SHSW box 47.

<sup>73</sup> Atlanta Project, 'Preface' c. 1966 pp. 1, 3, *passim*. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 11. For the Atlanta Project, even the name 'jazz' was an example of racism, since the term was originally white slang for sexual intercourse and therefore suggested that black music was base and somehow dirty. Untitled attachment to Atlanta Project, 'Preface' p. 3; second attachment to 'Preface' p. 2. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 11. ('Preface' contains two untitled, undated and anonymous attachments with separate numbering.)

<sup>74</sup> Atlanta Project, 'Preface' pp. 5-6. See also first untitled attachment to 'Preface' p. 2.

It is commonly suggested that the Atlanta Project was heavily influenced by Malcolm X's separatist and Nation of Islam-influenced philosophy, Frantz Fanon's colonial writings (particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*) and elements of Robert F. Williams' thought.<sup>75</sup> The 1964 Summer Project also exerted an influence on the group. As the announcement of the Atlanta Project's formation stated, 'it represents just another effort on the part of SNCC to return to local politics, an effort which began with the formation of the Freedom Democratic Party in the summer of 1964.'<sup>76</sup> The Atlanta Project noted that political, social and economic programmes would not be enough to ensure the success of the freedom struggle. It asserted that, 'we must develop among the urban masses an intense pride, dignity and self-respect... a sense of pride in their beauty, strength and resourcefulness; and also a meaningful sense of self-respect.'<sup>77</sup> To spread its message, the Atlanta Project established a newspaper and a freedom radio station with a similar concept to Williams' *Radio Free Dixie*. The Atlanta Project filtered its interpretation of black capitalism through cultural nationalism in a proposed community store. The store would offer local crafts, including material produced by sewing co-operatives in Mississippi alongside the work of local artisans and a range of goods from African nations. For the Atlanta Project, this store would be another link with the local community that offered SNCC the opportunity to promote cultural links with Africa and the richness of African American culture that evolved from the freedom struggle. 'The store,' concluded the proposal, 'should be the fulcrum of a broad cultural and informational campaign directed towards the Black community,' and was thus to become a focal point for the development of cultural awareness.<sup>78</sup> Although the store reflects the Atlanta Project's acceptance of a form of black capitalism, it is notable that

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<sup>75</sup> John Churchville, 'An Analysis of the Civil Rights Movement' c. 1966. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 11. The paper discusses at length the house Negro/field nigger analogy that had been so central to Malcolm X's thought. See also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 192, 196, 198; John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998) p. 381.

<sup>76</sup> Untitled Atlanta Project position paper, c. spring 1966 p. 1. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 6.

<sup>77</sup> Atlanta Project, 'The Nitty-Gritty: The Reasons Why' c.1966 pp. 1, 2; Atlanta Project, 'Freedom Radio Station' c.1966. SNCC Vine City box 1 folder 8.

<sup>78</sup> Atlanta Project, 'The Necessity' p. 6.

the store was to be fully integrated into the black community. Rather than simply importing African artefacts, as CORE's stores proposed, the SNCC store would become an outlet for community arts and crafts, thus putting money back into the hands of local community. It more accurately reflects a cultural nationalist, rather than a black capitalist, thrust.

Chicago SNCC also noted the value of identity and culture to the liberation struggle, arguing that Malcolm X's most important message was black pride as the key to self-actualisation. For Chicago SNCC, white culture was one of the foremost weapons in the campaign to subjugate African Americans and therefore black freedom fighters should fill themselves 'with hate for all white things.'<sup>79</sup> Thinking black, which would naturally be closely associated with aligning oneself with the African motherland, was a vital element of throwing off the shackles of white domination, a point of view that first articulated itself within SNCC during 1964. Similarly, one of the major elements of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) programme was black consciousness and an understanding of history and culture. Important points of reference for the LCFO were the ideas of Frederick Douglass and Du Bois alongside the examples of Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>80</sup> Even as SNCC staggered towards its demise it continued to emphasise the value of history and culture to the movement, placing education in these subjects and liberation schools at the top of its programme during 1969. As a fundraising letter sent out in February 1969 noted, SNCC's main goals were 'centred around informing oppressed people of their oppression, and creating pride, dignity, and self-determination among Black people.'<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Chicago SNCC, 'We Want Black Power' 1967 p. 2. SAVF, SHSW box 47.

<sup>80</sup> SNCC pamphlet, 'The Black Panther is Coming!' p. 3. SAVF, SHSW box 47.

<sup>81</sup> SNCC fundraising letter, 19 February 1969 p. 1. SAVF, SHSW box 47.



## Conclusion

Hamstrung by their respective financial limitations, CORE and SNCC struggled to institute projects that reflected their aims. CORE's failure to commit to the Cultural Action Department is an apt metaphor for the organisation's overall commitment to cultural organising. Between 1965 and 1969, CORE continued to search for its own identity and eventually settled on a militant black nationalism that incorporated elements of cultural nationalism. Initially, the organisation seemed content to follow SNCC's programme of developing local leadership. This direction, however, was never going to yield the monies that a large organisation needed. CORE's constant search for funds resulted in a continuous policy of differentiating itself from the other civil rights organisations. Coupled with its reliance on the initiatives of its individual members, this resulted in CORE adopting apparently contradictory poses, such as its acceptance of federal funding while it was pursuing black nationalism. Although CORE became aware of the value of African American culture to the freedom struggle, it always maintained that politics was of greater importance. Likewise, CORE's attempts to take advantage of the cultural mood were dominated by the organisation's need to generate funds, as demonstrated by Ollie Leeds' assertion that going into business means either making money or losing it. At a time when black nationalists were becoming increasingly visible in African American life, CORE's rhetoric suggests that the organisation acknowledged the power of black culture, but its actions indicate that the relationship between black culture and CORE was defined by finance.

SNCC's commitment to furthering its cultural organising was also defined by its dwindling resources. Although SNCC maintained that the freedom schools were a success, the organisation did not have the finances or the staff to ensure their continuance. That isolated schools, such as the freedom school in Arkansas, existed is testament to the commitment of individual organisers. Similarly, whilst SNCC staff members continued to look to Africa for inspiration, the organisation could not follow this up with the finances to put plans into action. The Atlanta Project's plans suggest

that SNCC activists adopted cultural nationalism with more verve than CORE but, as a whole, SNCC's physical (as opposed to rhetorical) commitment to using African American culture as a weapon was limited. The failure of many SNCC initiatives after 1964 suggests that the organisation had an ambivalent relationship with cultural organising. Whilst many in SNCC, particularly its black nationalists, were keen to invoke black culture as an organising tool, the organisation as a whole did not put such plans into action. This might therefore suggest that SNCC had little commitment to cultural organising. However, SNCC's declining relevance in the late 1960s and its commensurate financial troubles must also be taken into account. Following the election of Stokely Carmichael, SNCC's commitment to organising gradually dwindled as Carmichael spent more time lecturing in order to raise funds. Carmichael's rhetoric is a clear indication of SNCC's growing interest in cultural issues. His successor, H. Rap Brown, also noted the pernicious effects of white schooling and concluded that culture must be political.<sup>82</sup> Many projects withered away during this period, though. It is clear that new projects, such as the liberation and residential schools, were never going to receive the funding that they needed to ensure their long term success. Within this context, it is therefore important to examine the proposals that SNCC organisers developed in the wake of the 1964 Summer Project to discern how they wished the organisation to develop. That many such projects involved the utilisation of black culture to unite the black community is significant. That so many also took inspiration from the freedom schools indicates the enduring influence of the Summer Project on SNCC and its central position in SNCC history.

Between 1965 and 1969, the three major civil rights organisations found themselves trying to keep pace with the advance of Black Power. The SCLC, in particular, was uncomfortable at the suggestion that a black movement was more viable than an interracial movement. SNCC and CORE embraced Black Power more heartily

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<sup>82</sup> Brown also states that his education led him to conclude that Shakespeare was a 'faggot' but that the 'propaganda machine' that was white education ignored this fact. H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger, Die!* (New York: Dial Press, 1969) pp. 21, 141.

and tried to combine Black Power concepts with their pre-existing programmes. As their rhetoric became more strident, their appreciation of the worth of black culture to the freedom struggle also took a more assertive turn. However, this must be interpreted within the Black Power context that led to a decline in the financial contributions to the civil rights organisations. A 'Black is Beautiful' conference was hardly going to assuage the fears of white America in the wake of massive urban riots. The black nationalist plans of SNCC and CORE tacitly accepted that the riots were a justified reaction to a long-standing grievance. The expulsion of whites from SNCC and Ethel Minor's declaration of solidarity with Palestine further alienated SNCC's financial backers.<sup>83</sup> These decisions were compounded by the organisation's decision to focus its fundraising on the black middle class, who did not answer the call. Without the sympathy that the earlier civil rights movement attracted, the civil rights organisations were fighting a losing battle.

The civil rights organisations' history between 1965 and 1969 establishes that cultural impulse that gathered pace during the early 1960s continued to exert an influence in the late 1960s. Their collective response to Black Power suggests that the cultural aspect of Black Power elicited strong reactions from civil rights moderates. Although the SCLC refused to contemplate the more extreme politics of Black Power, it realised that it had to accept some of the challenges set by the radicals. As for SNCC and CORE, both saw in Black Power an opportunity to claim the vanguard position in the new revolution that they thought was imminent. Whilst their programmatic commitment was less pronounced than their rhetoric suggests, the numerous plans that the organisations considered establishes that both took a sincere interest in applying culture as a political weapon. Ultimately, though, SNCC and CORE failed and, by the end of the 1960s, were effectively moribund. A number of factors contributed to their

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<sup>83</sup> For riots in Detroit and Newark, Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 168-169; Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) pp. 74-75, 78-84. For SNCC and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Carson, *In Struggle*, pp. 267-269.

collapse, including their financial deficits, programmatic stagnation, FBI infiltration and an erroneous belief that revolution was imminent. Ultimately, African American culture could not counteract the realities that faced both organisations. It must be implicated in the organisations' failures but that it addressed the crucial issue of African American identity must also be acknowledged.

## 8.

### **‘In struggle, art is a weapon’: Black cultural nationalism, 1965-1969**

Between 1965 and 1969, Black Power gained greater currency within the black community. Although it did not completely overrun moderate elements within the movement, its radicalism, as has been demonstrated, influenced the major civil rights organisations. Existing black nationalists found that their views became increasingly popular amongst black youth during this period and certain elements that emerged from the integrationist movement began to focus on the limitations of biracialism.

The 1964 Summer Project convinced the Free Southern Theater (FST) that the black community needed theatre. Its experience of the Black Power years is emblematic of the civil rights movement as a whole. Following its formal break from civil rights movement activities to develop its own identity, it found audiences dwindling without the publicity of the movement and came to realise that community activism was the only viable means of survival. Little wonder that Clarissa Myrick Harris has termed the company the mirror of the movement.<sup>1</sup> Its increasing fascination with black nationalism clashed with the integrationists in the group and led the FST towards a new conception of the role of culture in the freedom struggle. This development also had an impact on the FST’s audience and its relationship to its largely white funding sources. Successful in establishing an operational base in New Orleans, the FST failed to make an impact on

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<sup>1</sup> Clarissa Myrick Harris, ‘Mirror of the Movement: The history of the Free Southern Theater as a microcosm of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements 1963-1978 (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1988). Title quotation: Stokely Carmichael, interview with ‘Nomo’ KFPA radio show, Los Angeles. Bancroft Library, UC-Berkeley cassette PT710.

the national stage and isolated itself from the nascent Black Arts Movement. Although this isolation starved the FST of national publicity, it also enabled the group to maintain its own identity and ensured that it was able to ride out the Black Power storm.

The FST moved towards black nationalism as a direct result of its experiences in the South. Although its philosophy was defined in part by Malcolm X's conception of black nationalism, its reading of Malcolm X was filtered through its experience of the South. After his encounter with Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka also attempted to bring black theatre to the black community. His black theatre experiments represented his first major attempt to become involved in community activism. He then became involved with Ron Karenga's Us organisation and, to a lesser extent, the Black Panther Party (BPP). Baraka thus forms a direct link between Robert F. Williams and late 1960s Black Power activists. During this period, Baraka continued to hone his conception of black nationalism through his writing, although his increasing commitment to political organising left him with little time to hone his craft. His cultural nationalism compelled him to simplify the political message of his work in order that it be directly relevant to the black community. Thus he abandoned subtlety and nuance in favour of dogmatic agit-prop. His late 1960s plays tend towards a simplistic, Manichean interpretation of struggle. Although their aesthetic qualities have been called into question, they illuminate a number of important elements of late 1960s black nationalist thought and they offer intriguing glimpses into Baraka's psyche.

Baraka's role on the west coast also illuminates the troubled relationship between the BPP and Us. Both organisations developed from Donald Warden's Afro-American Association before pushing themselves towards the centre of the Black Power controversy. Led by Maulana Ron Karenga, the Los Angeles-based Us organisation believed that organising around an exclusive black African culture would solve the black community's problems. Us relied on a quasi-military devotion to discipline and to its leader. Naturally, it rejected alliances with white radicals. Whilst many commentators suggest that the BPP was simply a political organisation, the BPP's

appreciation of culture was an important facet of its critique of American society. Its battle with cultural nationalists has become oversimplified and caricatured as gun-toting Marxist revolutionaries facing off against gun-toting African warriors. In fact, the BPP was closer in spirit to the cultural nationalists than even party members appreciated. The difference between Us and the BPP was simply in terms of the use that could be made of culture and the relative merits of an exceptional African American culture versus an all-encompassing African culture. A full examination of the relationship between the BPP, Us, African American politics and African American culture indicates that the two organisations and the two impulses were by no means mutually exclusive. Taken as a whole, these elements of Black Power activism suggest that Black Power, as a movement, had a solid relationship with the integrationist movement in the South. They also suggest that, although Black Power had a close relationship with African American culture, the former was not dominated by the latter. It might have been 'essentially cultural,' but it also was firmly and explicitly political.<sup>2</sup>

### **The FST and Black Power**

The FST ended its formal relationship with SNCC after 1964, although its internal arguments often reflected those of SNCC. A debate on institutionalisation revealed large differences of opinion as to the direction of the theatre and resulted in the organisation settling in New Orleans. Just as James Forman argued in favour of SNCC becoming a more rigid and disciplined unit, Richard Schechner argued that the FST needed to develop a solid institutional base in order to cement the group's financial stability. Gil Moses and John O'Neal, influenced by Bob Moses' heady brew of existentialism and committed individualism, argued that an organisation – if needed – would develop naturally around the theatre that they brought to the masses.<sup>3</sup> Although

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<sup>2</sup> William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Moses letter to Schechner, 11 July 1964; Schechner letter to Moses and O'Neal, 14 July 1964 in Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner, Gilbert Moses (eds.), *The Free Southern Theater by*

they backed down on the New Orleans issue, Moses and O'Neal continued to bicker with Schechner until the latter's departure in 1966.

Between 1964 and 1965, the FST continued to present white theatre to a black audience but, without SNCC's institutional backing, struggled to attract audiences. Experiments with whiteface performance failed to engage audiences in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>4</sup> The autumn 1965 tour included *In White America* alongside Brecht's *The Rifles of Senora Carrar* and Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*. Designed to suggest that 'sometimes bloody struggle [was needed] to organize grievances for effective political change and action,' the tour hoped to reach a succession of integrated audiences.<sup>5</sup> That the FST was becoming ambivalent about nonviolence is clear from the selection of these plays and was a direct result of the company's experience of Mississippi in 1964. The plays indicate that the FST was already beginning to reconceptualise the movement and its own relationship with the southern black audience. However, the FST was not able to draw an integrated audience, leading to the tour's collapse in October and the beginning of a period of intense debate within the FST as to its future.<sup>6</sup> The FST realised that it could not contend with the South's social structure: its integrated company could not perform in

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*The Free Southern Theater*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) pp. 14, 16. For SNCC debates, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 138-140, 155-157, 169-170; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, illustrated edition 1985) pp. 418-427.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Harrington, 'Free Southern Theatre: Speech for the Speechless' *Village Voice* 11 February 1965; Sandra Schmidt, 'Trying Theater in the Rough' *Christian Science Monitor* 16 April 1965. Samuel Walker papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) box 1 folder 11. Gilbert Moses, John O'Neal, Denise Nicholas, Murray Levy, Richard Schechner, 'Dialog: The Free Southern Theatre' (1965) in Annemarie Bean (ed.), *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1999) pp. 108-109; Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956) pp. 21-25, *passim* for slavery as an issue in the play. *Godot* hit a nerve with Fannie Lou Hamer who likened Vladimir and Estragon to 'men dressed just like these, sitting around the bars, pool halls, and on the street corners waiting for something! They must be waiting for Godot! But you can't sit around waiting. Ain't nobody going to bring you nothing. You got to get up and fight for what you want.' Quoted in John O'Neal, 'Motion In The Ocean: Some political dimensions of the FST' in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 178. Amiri Baraka also experimented with whiteface during the same period. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, revised edition 1997) p. 309.

<sup>5</sup> FST programme n.d. p. 3. Social Action Vertical File, SHSW box 19. Hereafter cited as SAVF. See also 'Progress Report: Free Southern Theater' summer 1965. The Free Southern Theater Records 1963-1978, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University reel 2 box 6 folder 12. Hereafter cited as FST.

<sup>6</sup> FST press release, 19 October 1965. FST reel 30 box 93 folder 10.



the white community and performances in the black community (to which it consciously addressed its work) could not attract whites. For Denise Nicholas, this failure derived just as much from the FST's growing belief that its improvisational work was more exciting in both theatrical and political terms. Similarly, Tom Dent felt that the FST had to develop a new, black repertory.<sup>7</sup>

It comes as little surprise to discover that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* soon became required reading for the FST. For Richard Schechner, Malcolm X's autobiography said something that the black members of the FST had been feeling for some time. He felt that many of the 'intellectual types' in the organisation could not validate their own experience until somebody else wrote that they had experienced something similar. Or, as Denise Nicholas put it, 'I never knew I was black until I read Malcolm.' Schechner notes that Malcolm X re-awakened Gil Moses' black nationalism and that soon after the group had read the autobiography, discussion moved from whether the FST should expel its whites to the implementation of their expulsion.<sup>8</sup> Just as Amiri Baraka found that Malcolm X's words articulated what was inside his own head, the FST identified with and found solace and justification in Malcolm X's autobiography. This identification manifested itself in both the FST's racial identity and in a new-found faith in improvisation.

There are a number of indications that Schechner was correct to denote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a pivotal document in the FST's history. In November 1965, Gil Moses informed John O'Neal him that he was now convinced that both the FST and integration were effectively dead. He felt embarrassed that the FST was still presenting white plays and proposed that it develop an adaptation of Baraka's *Dutchman*, a play steeped in the new African American mood. Moses argued that, 'the

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<sup>7</sup> Denise Nicholas, 'View From The Free Southern Theater' *Liberator* July 1966. p. 20. Dent was previously associated with Amiri Baraka's short-lived On Guard organisation in New York City, before founding the Umbra Poet's Workshop and becoming a follower of Malcolm X. By 1965, tired of the violence in New York, Dent returned to his home town and joined the FST. Thomas C. Dent, 'A Look Ahead' in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 232; Kalamu ya Salaam, 'Enriching the Paper Trail: An Interview with Tom Dent' *African American Review* 22,2 (summer 1993) pp. 331-333.

<sup>8</sup> Schechner, 'The FST And Me' in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 221. Nicholas quote *ibid*.

search for roots leads us, then, back to Africa.” He was also stung by the group’s financial reliance on white donors and suggested that the company direct its fundraising at the black middle class, representing another move towards black nationalism. Nicholas also began to assert a black nationalist consciousness, claiming that, ‘we need Black theaters in the Black communities. We had better stop waiting for the man to integrate his theaters before our talent dries inside of us like dust in the Southern sun.’<sup>10</sup> Malcolm X spurred the FST to embrace a nonreligious black working-class culture that stemmed from the field slaves. His words encouraged the FST to become more sceptical of integration and to look outside European theatrical traditions for inspiration.

Nicholas and Dent’s feelings were confirmed by the rapturous receptions given to the FST’s improvisational pieces based on the local movement in Louisiana during late 1965 and early 1966.<sup>11</sup> Dent concluded that audiences related more easily to improvisational performances, suggesting that Malcolm X’s validation of blackness also gave the FST confidence to improvise. This, he said, was ‘a significant breakthrough toward cultural development of untouched, yet amazingly sophisticated and responsive audiences.’ Although there is a suggestion that the FST was suffering a form of James Forman’s local people-itis, this was no patronising, paternalist attitude. ‘Art,’ as Dent confirmed, ‘is not an ivory tower exercise but always, basically, an act of communication.’<sup>12</sup> The FST always intended its work to relate directly to the southern black community. The experience of the 1964 Summer Project and the company’s subsequent failures suggested that it could not rely on an integrationist message. Coupled with Malcolm X’s autobiography, these influences led the FST to focus its work on its black audiences. The response to the Louisiana performances also suggests

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<sup>9</sup> Moses letter to O’Neal, 14 November 1965 in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* pp. 93-97 quote p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas, ‘View’ p. 20. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was not a short-lived fad in the FST. Even in 1967 it remained the most popular book in the FST’s literature workshop. Tom Dent, ‘The Free Southern Theater’ *Negro Digest* April 1967 p. 42. For the FST’s financial problems in 1965, Richard Schechner, letter to all board members, 5 June 1965; letter to Margaret Hellbach, 14 June 1965. FST reel 1 box 2 folder 19.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Dent, ‘The Free Southern Theater: An Evaluation’ *Freedomways* 6,1 (first quarter 1966) p. 27; Dent, ‘Free Southern’ *Negro Digest* p. 43; Harris, ‘Mirror’ pp. 44-46.

<sup>12</sup> Quotes Dent, ‘Evaluation’ pp. 27, 29. For local people-itis, Forman, *Making* p. 422.

that the FST's audiences had no need to be hectored on how to appreciate culture. That people related more easily to plays about what they knew, rather than metaphors or allegories, suggested to the FST that it merely had to reflect the latent culture of southern blacks.

The rise of black nationalism within the FST led to further internal tensions. Still reliant on white largesse, the company grew increasingly alienated from the black middle class through its failure to offer financial aid.<sup>13</sup> Between 1966 and 1967, O'Neal and Moses were forced out of the FST, the former by the army board and the latter by his own frustration and increasing racial militancy.<sup>14</sup> Although both later returned, their departures left Tom Dent in effective control of the organisation. During the summer 1967 tour, the FST's remaining white member, Murray Levy, departed.<sup>15</sup> However, despite the FST's all-black personnel, its rhetoric and failure to find a substantial audience left it in hock to white foundation support. The FST's ambivalent relationship with white foundations reflects the broader relationship between black nationalists and white money. Few black organisations in the late 1960s managed to exist without foundation or federal aid. Although black nationalist rhetoric repelled whites, the inability of black nationalist organisations to attract money from the black community – particularly the black middle class – forced them to accept white support. By 1967, foundation grants dominated the FST's income.<sup>16</sup> So, even though Dent had few qualms

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<sup>13</sup> Dent letter to Denise Nicholas, 13 June 1966 in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 115. See also Dent, 'Evaluation' pp. 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> O'Neal moved to New York, where he maintained contact with the FST and helped to solidify funding through contacts in the city. He had little impact on the company's philosophical direction. Moses moved to the North to study and teach drama. Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 61; Moses letter to O'Neal, March 1967, *ibid.* p. 102; Harrington, 'Speech for the Speechless'; Harris, 'Mirror' pp. 74-75, 85-89.

<sup>15</sup> Dent leaves no record as to whether it was of his own volition. Tom Dent, journal of summer 1967 FST tour, 14 June 1967 in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 149. Soon after, Dent made a number of sarcastic remarks about white applicants for FST apprenticeships in *Negro Digest*. Dent, 'Free Southern' *Negro Digest* p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> In 1966, foundation support was half that of the FST's own fundraising income. The Rockefeller Foundation provided over \$28,000 in 1967. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations alone contributed over half of the FST's income for the 1968 fiscal year, with both donating larger sums the following year, again comprising over half the FST's income. In December 1969, O'Neal told the Rockefeller Foundation of the FST's intention to apply for \$225,000 to be spread over three years, to be augmented with \$450,000 from the Ford Foundation. FST Statement of Receipts, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969. FST reel 19

about lambasting the Rockefeller Foundation for its patronising middle-class attitude and its use of the FST to keep the natives quiescent, he needed its money.<sup>17</sup> In applying for white money, the FST felt obliged to emphasise the positive implications of its work on ghetto residents, thus raising questions as to whether it was betraying its political sensibilities – selling out – in order to gain funds. This double bind explains Dent's frustration, rather than any concerted plan by the foundations to channel black energy into harmless cultural activities.

Following the collapse of the 1967 summer tour amid dwindling funds and audiences, the FST abandoned touring to concentrate on developing black nationalist theatre in New Orleans. Its community theatre project, inaugurated in 1965 and led by the recently returned John O'Neal, expanded to weekly acting, writing, dance and technical workshops.<sup>18</sup> O'Neal envisaged the creation of a new documentary theatre project that built layers of script and improvisation on pre-existing facts and ideas. This would create a new repertory and become a forum for the development of ideology. O'Neal asserted that all true African Americans descended from the field hands during slavery. For him, this new theatre had to reflect a common, working-class oppositional heritage, which again referred tangentially to the betrayal of the modern black middle class. The workshop had two objectives: making political points and reflecting real life.

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box 27 folder 2. John O'Neal, letter to Norman Lloyd, Rockefeller Foundation, 15 December 1969. FST reel 8 box 25 folder 15.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Dent, memo to FST Board of Directors, 4 June 1967 p. 2. FST reel 1 box 3 folder 1. David W. Payne, 'The Free Southern Theatre: A Report on its promises and problems as seen in New Orleans' July 1967 p. 1. FST reel 2 box 6 folder 17. Clarissa Myrick Harris argues that the FST should have put its collection pot where its mouth was, asserting that the black working class had successfully propped up African American institutions such as the church and private schools. Had the FST run a fundraising drive in Mississippi and charged fees for performances, she states, the organisation 'might have been surprised at the response.' She offers no proof for this assertion and overlooks the simple fact – acknowledged earlier in her work – that the FST only attracted 'paltry' amounts from audience donations. Given that audiences were already dwindling without SNCC's sponsorship, to assert that the FST should have been brave enough to impose admission fees ignores simple economics and the realities of the black South. Harris, 'Mirror' pp. 61, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Brooks, 'Free Southern Theater: An Experiment in Art' *National Guardian* 18 September 1965 p. 12. Records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Library of Congress microfilm reel 38 frame 190. Tom Dent, journal of summer 1967 FST tour. FST reel 18 box 56 folder 24. Thomas Dent, 'Progress Report: Workshop Program' November 1967. FST reel 1 box 3 folder 1. FST Newsletter, 18 March 1968. FST reel 1 box 3 folder 2. FST press release, 7 March 1969. FST reel 30 box 93 folder 13.

As Tom Dent argued, ‘the blood of the experience our people know, in all its joy and hurt, must *flow* on the stage.’<sup>19</sup>

Despite its pioneering role, the FST did not play a significant role in the Black Arts Movement.<sup>20</sup> Its geographical distance from the northern urban centres ensured that interaction with such groups as the New LaFayette Theater and Baraka’s Spirit House was minimal. The black nationalist impulse caused a shift of emphasis in the FST’s view of art. Initially, the organisation intended to spread culture to the masses, in order to help the black population actualise its dignity. Black Power pushed the FST towards the realisation that African American culture was already the richest and most complex culture that the United States had to offer. The FST’s task, then, was to affirm the value of this culture and help the masses to develop and adapt it to their own uses, thus creating their own cultural autonomy. Although initially committed to integration, the FST’s primary focus was always the black community. As Moses claimed of the FST’s early tours, ‘we wanted the theater to deal with black artists and the black audience. But [our] political aims reflected the political aims of the Movement at that time: integration.’<sup>21</sup> Its attempts to promote integration, by integrating itself and by trying to attract an integrated audience, only revealed to the FST that this was an illusory goal. Its encounter with Malcolm X served to confirm this feeling. The FST feared that its work would become reduced to minstrelsy, and so set out to create its own repertory that rejected the influence of white theatre. For Dent, presenting white plays was effectively saying to the black community, “‘what you have ain’t shit. If you want to be ‘cultured’ you got to dig *Godot*.” Well I say goodbye *Godot*,’ he continued, ‘we’ll stick with Otis [Redding]... And the hell with what the white critics say or expect.’<sup>22</sup> In accepting that

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas C. Dent, letter to John [O’Neal] 19 July 1967 p. 1. FST reel 4 box 11 folder 21. Emphasis in original.

<sup>20</sup> Mance Williams, *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical-Critical Analysis of the Movement* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) pp. 62-63.

<sup>21</sup> Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Dent, ‘A Look Ahead’ in Dent *et al*, *Free Southern* p. 233. Dent’s invocation of Redding is, in fact, a misreading of Redding’s relationship with black and white culture. Redding’s frequent writing partner, Steve Cropper, was a Missouri-born white man whose background was as much white country as black rhythm and blues. Dent also ignores the fact that Redding recorded almost all of his hit records with

the artist needed to break out of the double consciousness straightjacket, the FST firmly positioned itself within the Black Arts Movement. That the FST emerged from movement activities in 1964 suggests that black nationalism itself derived just as much from the mainstream movement as it evolved as a critique of the movement. The FST suggests that the new black theatre of the late 1960s owed a profound debt to the southern organising of the civil rights movement. As Richard Schechner concluded, 'FST was never – and perhaps should never be – an “independent” theater. It is tied to the Freedom Movement and to the fate of black people in America.'<sup>23</sup>

## **Amiri Baraka**

While the FST was retreating into New Orleans, Amiri Baraka was furthering his exploration of the relationship between liberation and culture. The assassination of Malcolm X convinced Baraka that black unity was the only method through which the black nation could survive. Malcolm X's concentration on black consciousness was, for Baraka, confirmation that black culture should be wedded to the freedom struggle. 'The Black artist,' he argued,

is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgement.... Art, Religion, and Politics are impressive vectors of a culture... Politics gives a social order to the culture... The Black man must seek a Black politics, an ordering of the world that is beneficial to his culture.<sup>24</sup>

For Baraka, the black artist was a Fanonist activist, devoted to the destruction of white America by any means necessary. He assigned himself a central role in this drama.

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Booker T and the MGS, an integrated group of musicians that included Cropper. Rob Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (London: Books With Attitude, 1997) p. 20; Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (London: Penguin, 1986) pp. 128-131, 142-151; Barney Hoskins, *Say It One Time For The Brokenhearted: Country Soul in the American South* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987) pp. 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> Schechner, 'The FST and Me' p. 214.

<sup>24</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation' in LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966) p. 248. During this time, Malcolm X's religion was of little importance to Baraka. Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 302.

Frustrated at his own lack of involvement in the movement and piqued by white criticism of his politics, within days of Malcolm X's death Baraka relocated to Harlem.

Late in 1964, Baraka wrote that revolutionary theatre should, 'force change; it should be change.'<sup>25</sup> Initially funded by the profits from the productions of his plays in Greenwich Village and a large grant from Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) represented Baraka's first foray into black nationalist organising. 'This will be a theatre of the revolution,' he declared.<sup>26</sup> It became an important organisation in Harlem, employing up to 200 people during its 12-month life and inspiring many artists who later made up the Black Arts Movement.<sup>27</sup>

BARTS organised outdoor art exhibitions, jazz concerts, poetry readings and classes in playwriting, music, art and black history that educated some 400 students, alongside amateur and professional theatrical productions.<sup>28</sup> Amongst qualified teachers from both the public and private sectors, it employed Harold Cruse to teach black history to a class that occasionally featured FBI agents. The Umbra poets gave a reading at the opening of the BARTS theatre in May 1965. Musicians such as Sun Ra – who also taught cultural philosophy – and Archie Shepp performed in playgrounds and parks. One BARTS benefit concert featuring Shepp, Albert Ayler, John Coltrane and Bobby Hutcherson was recorded and released commercially, prompting Baraka to assert

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<sup>25</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'The Revolutionary Theatre' in Jones, *Home* p. 210. *Home* situates 'The Revolutionary Theatre' as a 1964 essay. The essay was considered so important that *Muhammad Speaks* excerpted it in August 1965. 'Greatest American Playwright Forecasts The Destruction of America!' *Muhammad Speaks* 6 August 1965 pp. 5-6. Amiri Baraka papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University box 9. Hereafter cited as Baraka papers.

<sup>26</sup> Amiri Baraka, 'Black Arts' undated fragment. Baraka papers box 12.

<sup>27</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) p. 156; Hoyt W. Fuller, 'Up In Harlem: New Hope' *Negro Digest* October 1965 pp. 49-50, 83; Bill Hall, 'What's Happening in Harlem?' report for SNCC, 24 November 1965 p. 2. SAVF, SHSW box 47. For HARYOU Allan Morrison, 'Hope for Harlem' *Ebony* October 1964 pp. 168-178.

<sup>28</sup> Black Arts Repertory Theater, 'Long Range Community Programs and "Summer Crash Program"' 25 June 1965 pp. 1, 4-6. Baraka papers box 12. Student numbers cited in Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) p. 66.

that 'something is really happening. Now.'<sup>29</sup> Baraka even headed a march featuring Sun Ra's Arkestra through Harlem as part of his programme to bring art into the public areas of Harlem.<sup>30</sup> Baraka, as director of BARTS, called on blacks 'to protect ourselves against every aspect of the white man's thinking... we have our own standards and references for judging the world ... we must throw down our differences and come together as black people.'<sup>31</sup>

Baraka enjoyed an idyllic summer in 1965, where art, arguments and mass audiences coalesced around BARTS's decree that radical art and black politics were united. Although Jerry Watts scoffs that BARTS was funded by white money and therefore represented a compromised black nationalism, it remains a significant attempt to fuse the freedom struggle with African American culture.<sup>32</sup> For Baraka, BARTS was a place where the black community could discover its true revolutionary ideology through its own art and culture. He was convinced that HARYOU's intentions were being subverted by BARTS's insistence on this revolutionary tradition. It seems unfortunate, then, that BARTS failed due to internal fissures and the demagoguery of certain members, leading Baraka to quit and leave for Newark.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 306; Lorenzo Thomas, 'The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement' *Callaloo* 4 (October 1978) p. 68; quote LeRoi Jones, liner notes to Various Artists, *The New Wave in Jazz* (New York: ABC LP, 1965) in LeRoi Jones (Amiri Imamu Baraka), *Black Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1968) p. 175. See also LeRoi Jones, 'Apple Cores' *Down Beat* 33,3 (10 February 1966) pp. 15, 48; Gilbert Erskine, review of *The New Wave in Jazz*, *Down Beat* 33,2 (27 January 1966) p. 29 for a sceptical view of the record.

<sup>30</sup> Amiri Baraka, speech at the Hip-Hop Generation Conference, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 22 April 2001. Notes in author's collection. Also BARTS, 'Long Range' p. 2; Baraka, *Autobiography* pp. 298-299, 306-309.

<sup>31</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'Blackhope' transcript of undated speech given as director of BARTS in Jones, *Home* pp. 235-237.

<sup>32</sup> Watts, *Amiri* pp. 156-160. Larry Neal argues that BARTS influenced a generation of Black Arts activists. Larry Neal, 'From "The Black Arts Movement"' in Donald B. Gibson (ed.), *Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes, and LeRoi Jones* (New York: New York University Press, 1970) pp. 215-216. James C. Hall suggests that the inception of the Black Arts Movement can be dated at the foundation of BARTS. James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 242 n.22.

<sup>33</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* pp. 325-328; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (London: W. H. Allen, 1969) p. 440. See also 'Police Raid LeRoi Jones' Theatre: Find Guns, Bomb' *Jet* 29,25 (31 March 1966) p. 65.



In August 1966, inspired by his return home, Baraka organised an Afro-American Festival of the Arts. Using BARTS as the model, Baraka hoped to raise black pride and self-awareness in Newark. Speakers including Stokely Carmichael, Harold Cruse and Ossie Davis shared stage space with Coltrane, Sun Ra, and other jazz performers. Poets including Larry Neal appeared alongside art exhibitions, drama and dance performances.<sup>34</sup> The festival again illustrates Baraka's keenness to unite art and politics. It sufficiently re-energised him that he established the Newark Spirit House, the spiritual heir of BARTS, soon after. For Komozi Woodard and Jerry Watts, the Spirit House became one of the 1960s' most significant Black Arts Movement institutions, performing plays for the community and, according to Baraka, 'present[ing] whatever the community want[ed].'<sup>35</sup> During a brief sojourn in San Francisco, Baraka also became involved in the Black Arts West organisation, which formed as a response to the Spirit House. There he helped to develop a repertory group that performed in Bay Area schools and community halls.

Part of the Spirit House programme included education in black consciousness involving 'cultural-political-socio-economic classes' and instruction in black history, philosophy and heritage through drama, poetry, art, dance and mixed media. Street theatre involved the community and newsletters were widely distributed.<sup>36</sup> Educational programmes, centred on spreading African values and black pride, were instituted in an attempt to separate Newark blacks from the pernicious effects of double consciousness. Black history, literature and languages formed the core curriculum, with instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic taking a secondary role. Baraka's black revolutionary plays were performed and Newark youths were encouraged to become politically and

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<sup>34</sup> 'Newark Afro-American Festival of the Arts' pamphlet 1966. Baraka papers box 35.

<sup>35</sup> Woodard, *Nation* pp. 66-67; Watts, *Amiri* pp. 291-292, 367-368 for the influence of the Spirit House on the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s; Baraka quoted in Stephen Schneck, 'LeRoi Jones: or, Poetics & Policemen or, Trying Heart, Bleeding Heart' *Ramparts* 29 June 1968 p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Amiri Baraka, untitled notebook, 1967 f. 12.1. Imamu Amiri Baraka papers, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley, folder one. These papers are not to be confused with the Howard collection. See also Amiri Baraka, 'Work Notes - '66' in Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1971) pp. 11-15.

culturally active. Those in the Spirit House argued that, 'we are engaged in a cultural revolution... we feel that the best place to start is with our children.'<sup>37</sup> Control of the education process was a fundamental component of the revolution. The Spirit House education programme, led by Amina Baraka, emphasised black spirituality whilst acknowledging the need to involve the black community in the political process. Hence the Spirit House, in conjunction with other community groups, encouraged blacks to register to vote. The gender politics of the Spirit House reflected those of both the 1964 Summer Project and *Us*: women were "relegated" to teaching roles and were considered to be subservient to men.<sup>38</sup>

Following the example of BARTS, the Spirit House enticed the community with cultural programming, whilst simultaneously propelling it towards political action. The success of the Spirit House stimulated Baraka to plan another arts convention in 1967. During its planning, he met Ron Karenga, whose magnetism drew Baraka towards cultural nationalism. Baraka was seduced by the cultist aura that surrounded Karenga and was swayed by the *Us* leader's conviction that culture was central to the black revolution.<sup>39</sup> Under Karenga's influence, Baraka concluded that blacks were instinctive beings who had been foxed by whites into reasoning, thus making them, 'the most schizophrenic people on this planet.'<sup>40</sup>

Baraka's plays in this period point to his increasing fascination with cultural nationalism. After abandoning allegory, Baraka argued – much like the FST – that truly black theatre dealt with the lives of black people and committed its audience to involvement in the freedom struggle. 'Black Theatre,' he stated, 'has to be making a

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<sup>37</sup> 'Proposal – Education in Newark' c.1967 pp. 13-15, quote p. 8. Baraka papers box 16. See also Amina Baraka, 'Proposal for Experimental Class at Robert Treat School' n.d. Baraka papers box 22. A 1968 Spirit House performance of Baraka's *A Black Mass* was recorded and released as a long-playing record. Amiri Baraka, liner notes to Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Sun Ra and the Myth Science Arkestra, *A Black Mass* (Washington DC: Son Boy Records CD [reissue], 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Committee For Unified Newark, 'Method' c. 1970. Baraka papers box 12. Amiri Baraka, 'Summer Project Philosophy' June 1968. Baraka papers box 22. David Llorens, 'Ameer (LeRoi Jones) Baraka' *Ebony* August 1969 pp. 82-83.

<sup>39</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 359.

<sup>40</sup> Baraka quoted in Llorens, 'Ameer' p. 82.

dynamic statement and be of itself an act of liberation.<sup>41</sup> These sentiments help to explain why Baraka's plays during this period become increasingly simplistic and dogmatic. *Experimental Death Unit #1* marked a step away from the racial identity of the 1964 plays. In it, two white, Beckett-esque drug and sex addicts are seduced by an ageing prostitute, an act that compels one of them to kill the other. At the play's conclusion, a black revolutionary army comes across the scene and shoots the remaining characters. *A Black Mass*, from 1965, is Baraka's interpretation of the Nation of Islam's Yacub myth, with a cacophonous soundtrack provided by Sun Ra. In the Nation's mythology, Yacub, a powerful scientist, brought about a holocaust through designing and creating a white race to conquer the world.<sup>42</sup> Baraka's Yacub, an iconoclastic and sinister black magician, creates a soulless white man – The Beast – who kills Yacub's fellow magicians. The beast, a symbol of total evil, transforms all it touches into its own image and, at the play's conclusion, enters the audience to continue its depravity. *Jello*, a satirical play from 1965, converts Jack Benny's assistant Rochester into a revolutionary who robs Benny and his friends of their money – the symbolic debt owed to the black man by the white man – before absconding. Again, intelligence is absent from the white characters, so much so that the play was considered potentially libellous and Baraka's publishers refused to publish it. *Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show* focuses on the framing of a black postal worker, Court Royal, by white authority. Accused of harbouring a murderer, Royal is forced to defend himself in court. The victim, named the Prince, is a clear reference to Malcolm X. During the trial, pictures of a succession of black faces, including Malcolm X, King, Medgar Evers and Patrice Lumumba are displayed for Royal, who does not recognise them but is provoked into claiming that they are his sons. In order to save himself from the death penalty, he is ordered to kill the Prince's murderer – his own son. *Great Goodness* confirms Baraka's insistence on total dedication to black culture. Royal is alienated from his identity,

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<sup>41</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka interview with Mike Coleman transcript n.d. p. 1. Baraka papers box 9. References in the text position this interview between 1969 and 1970.

<sup>42</sup> E. U. Essen-Udiom, *Black Nationalism: The Rise of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) pp. 124-125.

allowing the power structure to exploit him through his job. This serves to alienate him from his race and blind him to the realities of American race relations, leading ultimately to the betrayal of his son. In *Madheart*, written for and first produced by the Black Arts Alliance of San Francisco State College in 1967, the only white character is a Devil Lady, whom the black man kills in order to free himself. Now free, the black man is empowered to reassert his natural dominance over black women who, in awe of his masculinity, submit to him.<sup>43</sup>

In comparison with the 1964 plays, these pieces relegate whites to simplistic and parodic roles, reflecting Baraka's increasing didacticism. Indeed, their simplicity and lack of subtlety borders on the patronising. Although Baraka never joined the Nation of Islam, he was influenced by the racial essentialism that pervaded Elijah Muhammad's thought. The two plays present whites as degenerates and suggest that blacks who consort with whites become infected by this degeneracy. Even in human form, the white characters are little more than savages. However, the plays offer useful insights into Baraka's racial politics. The explicit reference to the civil rights movement in *Great Goodness* suggests a degree of ambivalence about integrationists. Although Baraka acknowledges Evers and other murdered activists, only Malcolm X, on account of his black nationalism, assumes a physical form.<sup>44</sup> Baraka, it seems, was afraid of presenting integrationist figures as he was convinced that blacks and whites were permanently antagonistic. Baraka's anti-intellectual streak reveals itself in Jacob's immersion in scientific knowledge, Court Royal's erroneous trust in his lawyer and the lawyer's compromised position as a member of the black middle class. The Manichean relationship between the races in the plays indicate that Baraka's move towards racial

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<sup>43</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Experimental Death Unit #1, A Black Mass, Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show, Madheart* in LeRoi Jones, *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) pp. 1-15, 21-39, 45-63, 69-87; Baraka *et al*, *A Black Mass* CD. Synopsis of *Jello* in Amiri Baraka, 'Why No J-E-L-L-O?' in Jones, *Four* p. 89; Watts, *Amiri* pp. 265-266. *Experimental Death Unit #1* was written late in 1964, but Baraka chose to include it in his revolutionary plays anthology, suggesting that he considered it to represent a new phase in his development, and therefore will be discussed as such.

<sup>44</sup> A minor 1969 play, *The Death of Malcolm X* expanded Baraka's conspiracy theory about the assassination, implicating moderate black leaders and racially lobotomised blacks alongside the white power structure. Watts, *Amiri* pp. 277-280.

essentialism – explored in his 1964 plays – was complete, whilst the celebration of an aggressively masculine black nationalism affords an insight into Baraka's increasingly chauvinistic gender politics.<sup>45</sup> Viewed within the context of Baraka's black nationalism, the plays achieve their simple political goals. Baraka believed that black culture was vital to black liberation and, in all the plays, the virtuous black characters, such as Rochester, the black magicians in *A Black Mass* and the black characters in *Madheart*, are in tune with their natural rhythms and their people, illustrating where Baraka's sympathies lay.

Baraka's high level of political involvement impacted on his craft. His fascination with the political reality of being black in America convinced him that his art had to relate directly to the people. Part of this evolution could be traced in the opening essay from Baraka's 1971 collection, *Raise Race Rays Raze*. Baraka comments on a number of minor court cases which revealed the racism of the local legal system and asks, 'Black People, why are we the victims?'<sup>46</sup> Many of Baraka's other late 1960s essays address the victim question and assert that only black culture can liberate the black community. The rejection of victim status was bound up in the creation of Black Power and only black culture could give Black Power legitimacy. The themes of *Raise* also reflect Ron Karenga's intellectual dominance over Baraka between 1967 and 1971. There are frequent references to African civilisation and the need for the creation of an African American culture that reflects this monolithic past. *Raise* includes Baraka's fawning interpretation of Karenga's philosophy, which concludes that, 'it will transform Black people.'<sup>47</sup> A 1967 essay mirrors Karenga's beliefs, stating that, 'our only freedom will be in bringing a Black Culture to Power. We Cannot Do This Unless We Are Cultured.' Furthermore, Black Power 'must be spiritually, emotionally, and historically

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<sup>45</sup> Indeed, part of the attraction of Karenga's cultural nationalism for Baraka was its acceptance of polygamy. Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 321.

<sup>46</sup> Amiri Baraka, 'Newark Courthouse – '66 Wreck (Nigger Rec Room)' in Baraka, *Raise* p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Amiri Baraka, '7 Principles of US, Maulana Karenga & The Need for a Black Value System' *ibid.* p. 146.

in tune with black people... the socio-political must be wedded to the cultural.<sup>48</sup> Taking this argument to its logical extreme, Baraka argued in 1969 that 'Art without Nationalism is not Black... The Negro artist who is not a nationalist at this late date is a white artist.'<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the common failure of the civil rights organisations to develop a mass membership was simply due to the fact that they had not acknowledged the totality of black culture. Naturally, Baraka ignored the mass membership of the NAACP, citing instead the Nation of Islam's insistence on complete dedication to its philosophy as the reason for its success.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the 1960s, Baraka found himself increasingly aware of the political focus of Islam, and was suggesting that the black nation could only survive if it embraced the Nation of Islam. Politics, for Baraka, had to exist hand-in-hand with culture.

By this time, Baraka was increasingly concerned about the elitist turn of certain free jazz musicians, and was arguing that jazz was losing itself as it moved further from the blues. Thus he began to suggest that soul music was more relevant to, and in tune with, the black masses. The issue revolved around his conception of the role of the artist. Initially, Baraka felt that the free jazz players were conveying some sort of elemental truth about the black condition through their rejection of Western form and structure. However, as his politics grew more rigid, he came to conceive of soul music as speaking more directly to black people. The jazzmen were alienating themselves from the masses by demanding that their audiences follow their experimentation. Thus Baraka argued that the music of Curtis Mayfield addressed itself to the masses, whereas Ornette Coleman was becoming more insular.<sup>51</sup> As he pointed out in 1969, blacks

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<sup>48</sup> Amiri Baraka, 'The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rites & Bpower Mooments' *ibid.* pp. 44, 42-43.

<sup>49</sup> Amiri Baraka, 'Black Art, Nationalism, Organization, Black Institutions' *ibid.* p. 98. Also Amiri Baraka, 'Nationalism Vs PimpArt' *ibid.* pp. 125-132.

<sup>50</sup> Baraka, 'Need' p. 43; Marvin X and Faruk, 'Islam and Black Art: An Interview With LeRoi Jones' *Negro Digest* January 1969 pp. 4-10, 77-80. See also Amiri Baraka, 'Simba Doctrine' p. 1, which asserts that 'culture involves a total value system.' Baraka papers box 35.

<sup>51</sup> LeRoi Jones, 'The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)' 1966 in Jones, *Black Music* pp. 180-211; Robert L. Allen, interview with LeRoi Jones (c.1967) transcript pp. 9-10, Baraka papers box 9. LeRoi Jones, 'Apple Cores #2' (1965) in Jones, *Black Music* p. 124. Soon after, Baraka was dismissing Coleman and Albert Ayler as purveyors of 'bullshit,' for their estrangement from their people – or, more

listened to soul music, 'because soul music describes us to our selves, it is about us... it is an extension of us.'<sup>52</sup> The music had to come from the spirit of the people as a whole, rather than the select few. It also had to be functional – James Brown's simplistic 'Say It Loud, I'm Black And I'm Proud' was a perfect example – rather than 'meaningless abstractions' to while away the hours in congenial decadence.<sup>53</sup>

Following his adoption of black nationalism, Baraka's work became a functional means of projecting ideology. In this sense, Michele Wallace is incorrect to assert that Baraka was 'first and last a writer... most concerned with compelling images.'<sup>54</sup> Just as the Black Panther Party and Us claimed that art without a message was useless, Baraka proposed that only agit-prop art retained validity. The creation of the white beast in *A Black Mass* could be read as Baraka's criticism of art for art's sake. Jacob's fascination with creation for creation's sake, as also suggested by his imposition of time on the universe, is read by Larry Neal as a swipe at functionless art – just as the white beast is evil and rigid time a perversion of natural rhythm, art without function is pointless.<sup>55</sup> Whilst a less dogmatic interpretation might suggest that functionless art would therefore have to exist in a vacuum and would struggle to infect the world, as the white beast does, Neal's interpretation indicates how influential Baraka's fusion of politics and art had become. It also presages Baraka's abandonment of his muse in favour of following his political proclivities. What his art gained in power and immediacy, it lost in subtlety and nuance. As such, it is perhaps a perfect metaphor for the entire Black Power movement.

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accurately, Baraka. Amiri Baraka, 'The Fire Must Be Permitted To Burn Full Up: Black "Aesthetic"' in Baraka, *Raise* p. 120.

<sup>52</sup> Amiri Baraka, 'What Is Black Art?' *Black NewArk* radio editorial, 24 November 1969 transcript p. 1. Baraka papers box 22.

<sup>53</sup> Baraka, 'What Is' p. 2. Baraka must have been unaware that the chorus of children on Brown's record, recruited at speed from local streets, was mostly white and Asian American. James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1987) p. 200.

<sup>54</sup> Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1990) p. 63.

<sup>55</sup> Neal, 'From' p. 220.

## **The Black Panther Party and Us**

There was also room for African American culture in the BPP's conception of struggle. Although the feud with Us has obscured historians' views of the BPP's relationship with culture, it helps to contextualise this historiographical oversight. A study of the BPP's newspaper and, in particular, the work of the BPP's Minister for Culture establishes that the BPP had a deep commitment to using culture as a political weapon.

After becoming increasingly sceptical of Donald Warden and the direction of the Afro-American Association (AAA), Huey P. Newton set about honing his own ideas about ghetto organising in Oakland, founding the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense during September 1966 with Bobby Seale. Although Newton the thinker was first and foremost a political animal, he appreciated the value of culture to the African American struggle. As part of the Soul Students Advisory Committee (SSAC), he successfully agitated Merritt College to offer a black history course. He appreciated the benefits of the AAA's reading classes and cultural awareness programmes. His differences with Warden stemmed from the organisation's refusal to come to terms with the present plight of black America and his disgust of Warden's implicit approval of capitalism.<sup>56</sup> For Newton, the failures of existing black organisations were down to their refusal to engage the lumpen proletariat rather than simply their programmatic miscalculations. Thus the cultural nationalism of the AAA and, to a lesser extent, that of the SSAC, was just as ineffective as the religious black nationalism of the Nation of Islam and the middle-class liberalism of CORE and the NAACP. After reading Mao, Fanon and Guevara, Newton remained aware of the value of heritage, asserting that all three writers 'saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity,' by their common oppressors.<sup>57</sup> Although Newton was convinced that dignity was intertwined with physical power and a Zen-like acceptance of death, he continued

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Lane, 'Huey Newton Speaks' interview 4 July 1970 (New York: Paredon pamphlet, 1970) pp. 62-64. Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation collection, Stanford University series 1 box 57 folder 7. Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide* (London: Wildwood House, 1974) pp. 64-65, 72, 108; Bobby Seale, *Seize The Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party* (London: Arrow, 1970) p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Newton with Blake, *Revolutionary* pp. 3-7, 73, 111-112. Quote p. 111.



to assert that knowledge was power and tacitly approved of the value of cultural awareness to the freedom struggle.

Many commentators, relying on the BPP's inflammatory rhetoric, believe that the BPP was diametrically opposed to cultural nationalism. Despite Newton's observation that cultural nationalism contained an erroneous and reactionary political perspective and Bobby Seale's repeated abuse of cultural nationalists in his memoirs, the BPP retained a proximity to cultural nationalists that it rarely dared to appreciate.<sup>58</sup> Newton and Seale initially reacted against cultural nationalism in order to attract the brothers on the block, as they often termed lower-class blacks. The decision to focus on these people was influenced by Fanon's theory about reciprocal exclusivity in a colonial situation and his assertion that, contrary to Marx's belief, 'any movement for freedom ought to give its fullest attention to [the] lumpen-proletariat.'<sup>59</sup>

Most scholars interpret the relationship between the BPP and Fanon simply through their respective attitudes towards violence. However, Fanon also sincerely believed in the value of culture to the freedom struggle and both Newton and Seale must have been aware of the use of culture in a revolutionary situation through their reading of *The Wretched of the Earth*: Fanon devoted a whole chapter to the pitfalls of using culture in such a situation.<sup>60</sup> He noted that colonial forces consistently aimed to deny the colonised their heritage. Since the claim to national culture would enable the colonised to maintain the hope of a future national culture – and hence the hope of freedom – the

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<sup>58</sup> Huey P. Newton, 'To The Black Movement' *The Black Panther* 15 May 1968 in Toni Morrison (ed.), *To Die For the People: Huey P. Newton Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1972) pp. 92-93; Seale, *Seize*. Karenga asserts that the BPP 'stripped and robbed [culture] of its liberating content.' M. Ron Karenga, 'Kawaida and its Critics: A Sociohistorical Analysis' *Journal of Black Studies* 8 (1977) p. 130. For the historians, Errol A. Henderson, 'The Lumpen Proletariat As Vanguard? The Black Panther Party, Social Transformation, and Pearson's analysis of Huey Newton.' *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1997) pp. 171-199; Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994); Alphonso Pinkney, *Red, Black, And Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) pp. 98-108, 122-124; Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 155-166, 174; the essays in Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic, 1998) emphasise the ideological differences between the BPP and Us.

<sup>59</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) p. 109.

<sup>60</sup> Newton with Blake, *Revolutionary*, p. 111; Seale, *Seize* pp. 42, 51-52; Fanon, *Wretched* pp. 166-200.

colonial forces would, out of necessity, set out to divert the colonised from this practice.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the colonised people would become alienated from their heritage and culture and rendered incapable of resistance. For Fanon, a cadre of native (organic) intellectuals would inevitably act to challenge this situation and would conclude that culture should become a focal point for the colonised nations – as African American cultural nationalists did. An homogenous culture would become a focal point for their organising which, for Fanon, was a dangerous amorphism. This focus on a vague Negro culture was too broad to address itself to the specific problems that faced black people of all nations: ‘the problems which kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert were fundamentally different from those which might confront Leopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta.’<sup>62</sup> Without acknowledging the variety of the black experience – and the particular historical context of the various cultures – the cultural impulse would disappear into an idealised past, as Newton suggested the AAA had. Fanon argued that the intellectual would have to ‘shake the people’ and help devise ‘a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature.’<sup>63</sup> This culture would be specific to the revolutionary situation and address itself to the particular issues pertinent to the revolution as they occurred. Flowing from this would come literature from non-intellectuals. Naturally, these people would be compelled not simply to write, but to engage themselves wholeheartedly in the struggle.<sup>64</sup> Thus the revolutionary artist could not be content with his or her revolutionary art. Artistic gifts were not an exemption from the revolutionary draft: artists had to prove their worth through action. From this perspective, African American cultural nationalists were simply at an intermediate stage in their development. Newton and Seale adopted Fanon’s dictum that cultural nationalism was a dangerous diversion from revolutionary activities but publicly refused to acknowledge Fanon’s insistence that culture could play a viable role in the

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<sup>61</sup> Fanon, *Wretched* p. 170.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p. 174. Note Fanon’s use of the past and present tense in this quotation.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p. 179.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p. 187.

revolution. However, the actions of the BPP suggest that the party retained a keen interest in the value of culture and that its antagonism towards cultural nationalism derived from other sources.

Far from embracing a 'cultureless leftism,' the BPP was in fact very much aware of the role that culture could play in the revolution.<sup>65</sup> Point Five of the BPP platform and programme asserted that knowledge of history was fundamental to liberation.<sup>66</sup> The BPP's implicit acceptance of the value of culture to organising can be discerned in the pages of its official newspaper, *The Black Panther Black Community News Service*. The newspaper became central to the operation of the party and allegedly reached a peak weekly circulation of over 100,000.<sup>67</sup> Primarily a vehicle for the propagation of the thoughts of the BPP's leadership, community news and socialist revolutionary thought, the newspaper was conceived as 'a living contemporary history of our people's struggle for liberation at the grass roots level.'<sup>68</sup> Close scrutiny reveals African American culture as an essential component of the newspaper's content.

Revolutionary art was fundamental to BPP philosophy in this period and featured prominently in the newspaper. Its chief architect was the BPP's Minister for Culture, Emory Douglas. Douglas had lived in the Bay Area since the age of seven. By the age of 18, he was studying and developing his artistic skills at San Francisco City College, influenced by the socially conscious work of Charles White and Elizabeth

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<sup>65</sup> Henderson, 'Lumpen' p. 186.

<sup>66</sup> It reads:

*We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.*

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

'Black Panther Party Platform and Program' October 1966 cited in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Da Capo, revised edition 1995) pp. 2-3. Emphasis in original.

<sup>67</sup> In November 1970, the newspaper changed its name to *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*. It will be referred to as *The Black Panther* in this study. Seale cites a circulation of 125,000 in late 1968. A Congressional inquiry claimed that as many as 140,000 copies of the newspaper were being distributed by late 1969. Seale, *Seize* p. 211; Pearson, *Shadow* p. 196.

<sup>68</sup> Landon Williams, 'The Black Panther: Mirror of the People' in *The Black Panther* 17 January 1970 p. 11.

Catlett.<sup>69</sup> During spring 1967, Amiri Baraka, then a visiting professor at San Francisco State University, invited Douglas to become his graphics specialist and design sets and props for his productions.<sup>70</sup> Baraka convinced the student of the propaganda value of art and the dual commitment of the artist to art and to activism. At the same time, Douglas became interested in the BPP and decided to join, offering to help with the design of the BPP's first newsletter. Despite Newton and Seale's concern that Douglas was not political enough, he was invited to spearhead the party's Ministry for Culture after being educated about the role of revolutionary art. Already aware of the role of art in the Cuban revolution and the struggles in the Middle East, Douglas learned that culture was not the entirety of the black revolution and came to appreciate the BPP's Fanonist line.<sup>71</sup>

Douglas soon developed a Fanonist-Maoist conception of his work. As Mao asserted, 'revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon... an important, indeed essential, fighting front in the general revolutionary front.' Mao decreed that artists must move among the masses and completely involve themselves in the struggle – a view echoed by Fanon. 'What we demand,' proclaimed Mao, 'is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form... we oppose both works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency towards the "poster and slogan style" which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power.' He concluded that 'an army without culture is a dull-witted army, and a dull-witted army cannot defeat the enemy.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Douglas biographical details from Emory Douglas interview with author, San Francisco 28 June 2001. Author's collection. Catlett was to take inspiration from the BPP in her 1969 work, *Negro es Bello II (Black is Beautiful)*. Reproduction in Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Douglas interview; Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 352. Baraka also spoke at BPP rallies during 1967. Regina Jennings, 'Poetry of the Black Panther Party: Metaphors of Militancy' *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998) p. 123.

<sup>71</sup> Douglas interview; Seale, *Seize* p. 209; David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little, Brown and co., 1993) p. 150.

<sup>72</sup> All quotes Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: Bantam, 1967) pp. 172-173.

Douglas followed these directions almost to the letter. As early as May 1968, he was asserting that revolutionary art ‘enlightens the party... as well as educat[ing] the masses of black people.’<sup>73</sup> He argued that

Revolutionary Art is an art that flows from the people. It must be a whole and living part of the people’s lives, their daily struggle to survive. To draw about revolutionary things, we must shoot and/or be ready to shoot when the time comes... One must make strong roots among the masses of the people. Then and only then can a Revolutionary Artist renew this visual interpretation of Revolutionary Art indefinitely until liberation.<sup>74</sup>

Douglas practised what he preached, participating regularly on BPP police patrols and at the BPP’s May 1967 interruption of proceedings at the California State Capitol.<sup>75</sup> His role as Minister for Culture primarily concerned the layout of *The Black Panther*, production of the vast majority of the artwork that adorned its pages and the contribution of articles on the role of revolutionary art and artists. All of his pieces contained a message for the black community that complemented the words contained within the newspaper. Douglas’s work rarely relinquished the rear cover of the BPP’s newspaper and survived *The Black Panther*’s frequent editorial changes.<sup>76</sup> His portraits of Black Power leaders were available for sale at BPP offices and his pictures posted up in homes and shop windows as a sign of support.<sup>77</sup> In an area where large numbers of people had become alienated from the system, Douglas reached out to those that would

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<sup>73</sup> Emory Douglas, ‘Revolutionary Art/Black Liberation’ *The Black Panther* 18 May 1968 p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Emory Douglas, ‘Position Paper #1 On Revolutionary Art.’ *The Black Panther* 20 October 1968 p. 5.

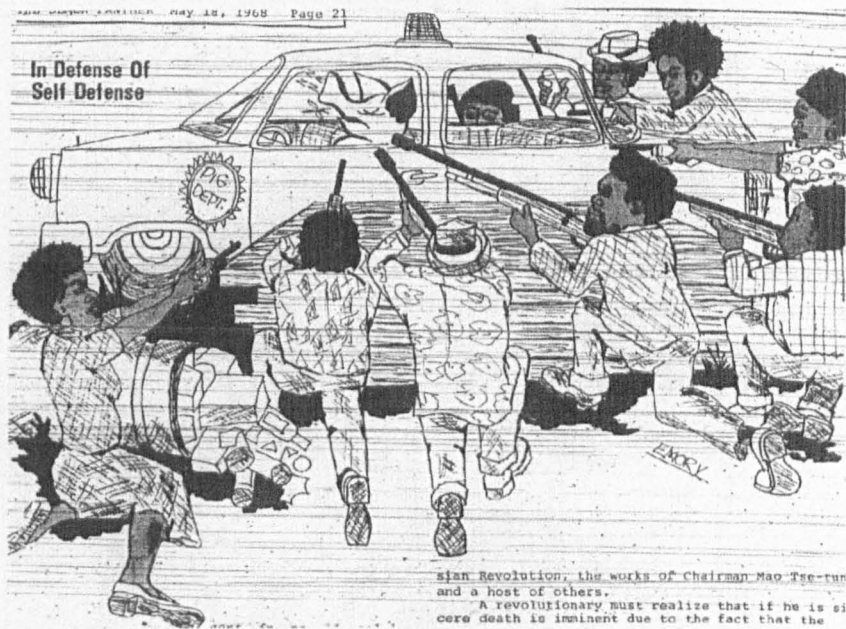
<sup>75</sup> Douglas interview; Hilliard and Cole, *This Side* p. 129; Erika Doss, ‘Imaging the Panthers: Representing Black Power and Masculinity, 1960s-1990s’ *Prospects* 23 (1998) p. 495.

<sup>76</sup> Newton, Seale and Eldridge Cleaver were the first editors. By November 1967, Cleaver and his wife, Kathleen had taken the responsibilities. By March 1969, Elbert “Big Man” Howard and Bobby Heron were sharing the editor’s chair. Christian Davenport also lists Raymond Lewis and Frank Jones as editors between 1969 and mid-1970, when Elaine Brown took over. United States House Committee on Internal Security, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, ‘The Black Panther Party: Its Origin and Development as Reflected in its Official Weekly Newspaper *The Black Panther Black Community News Service*’ 6 October 1970 p. 1; Christian A. Davenport, ‘Reading the “Voice of the Vanguard”: A Content Analysis of The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, 1969-1973’ in Jones (ed.), *Reconsidered* pp. 200-201.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Revolutionary Posters’ *The Black Panther* 10 June 1968 p. 28; Douglas interview; Charles Pinderhughes, letter to Jennifer Wood Nangombe 1 May 2000 forwarded to author. Pinderhughes was a member of the BPP who asserts that Douglas’s work ‘was a major inspiration’ to party members and the community at large. He also notes that Irish activists in Belfast distributed reproductions of Douglas’s work during the 1970s.

have treated purely written propaganda with disdain. For David Hilliard, Douglas's work was simply the best feature of the newspaper.<sup>78</sup>

Douglas's earliest BPP artwork relied on violent imagery and the depiction of a unified black (nationalist) community repelling the forces of white power, namely pig policemen and rat-like politicians. Initially the police were depicted simply as pigs but but, with Douglas's increasing confidence, evolved human bodies, enabling him to place them in realistic settings.



**Figure 1: 18 May 1968<sup>79</sup>**



**Figure 2: 7 September 1968**

<sup>78</sup> Hilliard and Cole, *This Side* p. 150.

<sup>79</sup> All the pieces included here were drawn by Douglas and printed in *The Black Panther* on the date noted and on the following pages: 18 May 1968 p. 21; 7 September 1968 p. 12; 2 February 1969 p. 3; 23 August 1969 p. 1.

Revolutionary art followed the BPP's changes in philosophy and direction in the 1960s. Douglas documented the BPP's increasingly violent argument with Ron Karenga in a series of pieces. On 17 January 1969, two BPP organisers, Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and John Huggins were shot dead (allegedly) by members of Us after a UCLA Black Students Union meeting had descended into petty name-calling. Soon after the UCLA shooting, Douglas depicted Karenga as a self-obsessed traitor, happy to accept 'pig' money.



Figure 3: 2 February 1969

Later that year, Karenga featured on the cover of the newspaper with Sambo-like lolling tongue and outsize lips, grasping at the morsels dangled by the pig power structure.



Figure 4: 23 August 1969

Douglas also reflected the BPP's increasing internationalism, taking influence from the material contained in the Liberation News Service, especially the propaganda posters from south east Asia, Africa and Cuba.<sup>80</sup> 'Their pictures,' he argued, 'show napalm burning people alive, but they always express the victorious spirit.'<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Douglas interview; Doss, 'Imaging' pp. 497-498. It is noteworthy that Douglas has not used his depictions of Karenga in his exhibitions for some time. Dugald Stermer, 'The Agit Pop Art of Cuba' *Ramparts* 14-28 December 1968 includes a poster by Douglas that was distributed in Africa by the Organization of Solidarity with Asia, Africa and Latin America in 1968 p. 34. Lane, 'Huey Newton Speaks' pp. 6-7 for the BPP's identification with worldwide liberation movements.

<sup>81</sup> Emory Douglas quoted in Phineas Israeli, 'Emory Grinds Down the Pigs' *The Black Panther* 22 November 1969 p. 6.



The myth of the BPP's rejection of culture as an organising tool derives from Newton and Seale's disagreements with the AAA. In their subsequent writing, both had a tendency to associate cultural nationalism with any form of African American reaction. The term 'cultural nationalist' therefore became an all-encompassing term of abuse for African Americans who had not completely subsumed themselves within Black Panther philosophy. It is imperative to note that this antipathy for cultural nationalists – namely Ron Karenga and Us – was also rooted in the violence that erupted between the BPP and Karenga's organisation. Ego clashes and the influence of the FBI exaggerated the differences between the two organisations, which led to the violence and hence to the BPP's insistence that cultural nationalism was a bastardised, naïve and dangerous aberration of African American protest.

Following his split from the AAA, Ron Karenga returned to Los Angeles and, in the wake of the Watts riot formed Us in February 1966. Influenced in part by SNCC, the organisation adopted a vanguard strategy, maintaining a black-only membership of fewer than 600.<sup>82</sup> Just as new members of the Nation of Islam were required to subsume their own identity within the collective identity, Us members had to change many aspects of their former life, from their clothing and hairstyle to their language, philosophy and names.

Karenga rejected Maoism, Marxism and Fanonism, arguing that they were insufficient to deal with the reality of the African American revolution, on the grounds that Marx and Mao were not black.<sup>83</sup> That Fanon took Marx and Mao seriously was

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<sup>82</sup> This might be a convenient ploy to explain the small number of Us members. Scot Brown, 'The Us Organization: African-American Cultural Nationalism in the Era of Black Power, 1965 to the 1970s' (PhD dissertation, Cornell University 1999) p. 24 cites the figure of under 600 without revealing his source. There are parallels with the BPP. See Huey P. Newton, 'The Correct Handling of a Revolution' *The Black Panther* 18 May 1968 in Foner (ed.), *Black Panthers Speak* pp. 41-45, which extemporises in Leninist fashion at length on the value of a vanguard party.

<sup>83</sup> Clyde Halisi (ed.), *The Quotable Karenga* (Los Angeles: Us Organization, 1967) pp. 16, 21. All quotes from *The Quotable Karenga* represent the words of Ron Karenga. Scot Brown cites a 1966 Karenga speech that approvingly quotes Fanon to argue that Karenga accepted Fanonist thought. He ignores the quote in the widely distributed *The Quotable Karenga*. Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 66-67. In 1969, Karenga called Marx a 'madman.' 'Karenga, Black Panthers Speak Out' *Los Angeles Sentinel* 6 March 1969 p. D2. See Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 357 for a critique of Karenga's selective use of white philosophy. Karenga certainly ignored his own reflection of the Leninist concept of a vanguard party.

most likely the reason for Karenga's dismissal of his work. He later confessed that part of his rejection of the American intellectual tradition was based on racial grounds. Presumably, this could also be extended to his rejection of other intellectual traditions.<sup>84</sup> Karenga rejected the concept of class struggle and argued that race cut through class divisions: the black bourgeoisie was simply a philosophical construct and all blacks were, by definition, oppressed by whites. Therefore the global issue was racism rather than class struggle and only black unity could address this problem. Karenga's relationship with capitalism, though, was more ambiguous. Although he deplored capitalism, he was realist enough to advocate what he termed 'black economics' in order that the black community benefit somehow from American capitalism.<sup>85</sup>

Us philosophy revolved around the seven principles of *Nguzo Saba*, unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, co-operative economics, purpose, creativity and faith, all wrapped up an ersatz African culture. For Karenga, unity centred on the colour, culture and consciousness of Blackness. Only through cultural organising could the black nation become a viable entity.<sup>86</sup> Karenga's philosophical reference points were, quite naturally, African. He studied African History and Kiswahili at Los Angeles City College before moving to the UCLA African Studies programme.<sup>87</sup> Kiswahili's pan-African popularity encouraged Karenga to consider Africa as a pseudo-nation. From Sekou Toure, Karenga took the concept of racial unity.<sup>88</sup> Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere's interpretations of socialism that linked African communal practices with socialist theory fed into Karenga's sceptical reading of Marxism and provided a framework for Karenga's political views. Their insistence that Africans need not follow rigid (text-based) doctrine reinforced Karenga's concept of African peoples as

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<sup>84</sup> Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 55-56. In an anonymous introduction to *The Quotable Karenga*, one of his followers asserts that Karenga saved him from having to wear 'some shark skin suit I had to buy from a Jew,' suggesting that Karenga had not transcended European anti-Semitism. Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* pp. 9, 12, 24-25, quote p. 26. See also Robert L. Allen, *A Guide to Black Power in America: An Historical Analysis* (London: Gollancz, 1970) p. 140.

<sup>86</sup> Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* pp. 13, *passim*.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 26-29.

<sup>88</sup> Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* p. 19.

instinctively cultural. Jomo Kenyatta's anthropological study of Kenya suggested that politics and economics were sub-divisions of culture, an interpretation that directly influenced Karenga's belief that African Americans formed a cultural nation with a common past, present and future. As Karenga noted, 'you can't have a revolution without culture because culture is the value system that will teach Blacks an appreciation for revolution.'<sup>89</sup> Kenyatta's insistence that the tribe represented an extended family directly influenced Karenga's chauvinist interpretation of women's roles in the revolution and his adoption of polygamy. Sukarno's thoughts on nationalism also exerted an influence on Karenga's interpretation of collective responsibility, but he missed Nyerere's assertion that socialism rejected racial essentialism.<sup>90</sup> Karenga was unconcerned at the contradictions within these philosophies. Senghor's concept of negritude was designed to combat colonial interpretations of African homogeneity, which clashes with Karenga's faith in quasi-Africanism. Kenyatta's belief that African peoples were intuitive rather than rational comes close to primitivism and contrasts with his stated aims of emphasising African diversity. Karenga chose to take only what he deemed suitable. He termed himself a cultural revolutionary and approached community organising as a cultural issue, arguing that the African American community had to free itself culturally before it could succeed in organising itself politically. Without this culture, he said, 'Negroes are only a set of reactions to white people.'<sup>91</sup>

Karenga's strong relationship with the Black Arts Movement developed from his acceptance that art was vital to the creation of a cultural nation. Although he rejected Maoism, his conception of the role of art was suspiciously similar to Maoist cultural theory:

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* p. 22.

<sup>90</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) esp. 'Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism' pp. 1-12; for Nyerere's rejection of racial essentialism, 'Socialism is not Racialism' *ibid.* pp. 38-44; Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1964); Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997) pp. 39-41; Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 30-39 confirms the influence of the African writers.

<sup>91</sup> Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* p. 13.

our creative motif must be revolution; all art that does not discuss or contribute to revolutionary change is invalid... There is no better subject for Black artists than Black people, and the Black artist who doesn't choose and develop his subject will find himself unproductive... All art must be revolutionary and in being revolutionary it must be collective, committing, and functional.<sup>92</sup>

For him, art was the medium through which Us philosophy could be spread to the black masses. Thus an Us dance troupe was organised which would perform various African dances. Again, the essential African American-ness of Us was emphasised: new steps and routines fashioned to explore elements of Us philosophy augmented traditional dances. Karenga was of the Senghorian opinion that black people were naturally infused with rhythm – the dance troupe would channel this ability into political expression.<sup>93</sup>

Although Karenga later argued that the BPP-Us feud was essentially ideological, initial relations between the two organisations were cordial, perhaps as a result of their mutual rejection of the AAA.<sup>94</sup> BPP members shared platforms with Us at the Black Congress in Los Angeles and other rallies during 1967.<sup>95</sup> In early 1968, almost one year after the BPP began organising in Los Angeles, Karenga spoke alongside Stokely Carmichael at a rally in support of Huey Newton. He stated that the defence of Newton symbolised growing African American unity. The differences between Karenga and the BPP at this point merely surrounded the presence of LAPD security at the rally, rather than any philosophical battles.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, certain tensions were apparent between

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.* pp. 29, 31.

<sup>93</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 10, 31 for Karenga's view of dance; Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 206-212 for the Taifa dance troupe.

<sup>94</sup> Karenga cited in Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (New York: Da Capo, 1995) p. 201.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 151-152; Douglas interview. Huey Newton appeared alongside Karenga and H. Rap Brown at the first Us Uhuru Day rally to commemorate the Watts riot. Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* p. 4; Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 148-149. Note also picture of Karenga alongside Rap Brown, Ralph Featherstone of SNCC and Dick Gregory at a 1967 press conference in Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Anchor, 1992) in between pp. 212-213.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 160-164; Carson, *In Struggle* p. 283; interview with Ron Everett-Karenga conducted by Clayborne Carson, 4 October 1977, side 2. Personal collection of Clayborne Carson. Note also that an Emory Douglas portrait of Amiri Baraka – then an active supporter of Karenga – was offered for sale as a BPP fundraising tool in June 1968 and that *Blues People* remained on BPP reading lists in September 1968. *The Black Panther* 10 June 1968 p. 28; 14 September 1968 p. 6. Thomas Kilgore Jr., a Baptist pastor in Los Angeles, also remembers BPP and Us members taking part in a

the two groups' philosophies. The BPP's Fanonist influence militated against an alliance with Us, for whom black culture was the only viable unifying tool for black people. Us also rejected alliances with white organisations, a stance that was in turn rejected by the BPP. Karenga's paradoxical willingness to enter into dialogue with the white power structure also created tension.<sup>97</sup> Much of the animus between the organisations, however, stemmed from a basic argument over turf. Due to his seniority amongst black Los Angeles activists and his leadership of the Black Congress, Karenga was considered to be the pre-eminent African American leader in the city. According to Black Panther Elaine Brown, BPP organising in Los Angeles was perceived as a threat to his status.<sup>98</sup>

Both Karenga and the BPP laid claim to Malcolm X's legacy. The first public meeting of Us was a memorial on the first anniversary of Malcolm X's assassination. In 1967, Us attempted to create a public holiday to observe his birthday.<sup>99</sup> Karenga's philosophy was close to Malcolm X's conception of a cultural revolution, although Malcolm X's notion of a cultural return to Africa had a more spiritual and mythical tone. For Karenga, Africa's symbolism and intellectual legacy was more important, even though he unconvincingly argued that 'we don't borrow from Africa. We utilize

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community meeting to discuss how to quell racial tension in the city following the assassination of Martin Luther King but note fn. 96, below. Thomas Kilgore, Jr., 'Black Leadership in Los Angeles' oral history n.d. pp. 149-150, UCLA Oral History Program transcripts, Bancroft Library, UC-Berkeley.

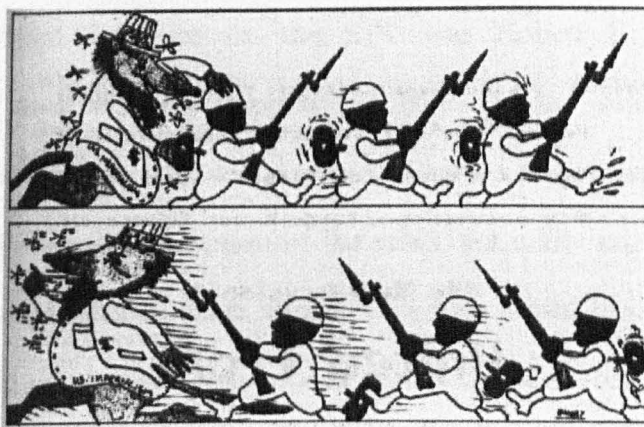
<sup>97</sup> Karenga met with California Governor Ronald Reagan to discuss the reaction to the King assassination. This decision provoked scorn from the BPP and especially Eldridge Cleaver, who had earlier challenged Reagan to a duel by the weapon of the Governor's choice. Cleaver promised to 'beat him to death with a marshmallow,' if need be. 'The Wall Street Journal Exposes Karenga' *The Black Panther* 2 February 1969 p. 3; Eldridge Cleaver, 'An Aside to Ronald Reagan' in Robert Scheer (ed.), *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York: Random House, 1969) p. 112; 'Cleaver Challenges Reagan To "Weapon Duel"' *Jet* 35,3 (24 October 1968) p. 4. Horne, *Fire* pp. 199-204 asserts that Karenga was happy to work with the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission and other state agencies to ensure maintenance of the peace and his own position within the community.

<sup>98</sup> Brown, *Taste* pp. 142-143; also Hilliard and Cole, *This Side* p. 163. Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 156-160 confirms Karenga's status. Scot Brown also suggests that the issue of rivalry rather than ideology was crucial to the BPP-Us tensions. *ibid.* pp. 173-175. Emory Douglas and Ron Karenga believe that Elaine Brown made no small contribution to Us-BPP tension through her provocative actions and rhetoric during late 1968 and early 1969. Douglas interview; Everett-Karenga interview with Clayborne Carson, side 2.

<sup>99</sup> Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 140-143; Karenga claims that he invited Malcolm X to speak at UCLA and remembers speaking alongside him whenever both visited the Los Angeles Nation of Islam mosque. *ibid.* p. 50.

that which was ours to start with.’<sup>100</sup> Although Kwanzaa, Karenga’s African-influenced December festival, was based on African rituals, it was initially conceived as an organisationally-specific black corrective to the hegemonic influence of white Christian festivals.<sup>101</sup>

Malcolm X was a crucial point of reference for the early BPP. Their armed protection of Betty Shabazz at San Francisco airport in February 1967 was not only a display of brinkmanship but also a symbolic capture of Malcolm X’s legacy.<sup>102</sup> For Huey Newton, Malcolm X, alongside Marcus Garvey, was one of the two most important black men of the twentieth century and a prime influence on the establishment of the BPP.<sup>103</sup> Early copies of *The Black Panther* contained pictures of Malcolm X, urging readers to remember his example.<sup>104</sup> Emory Douglas also utilised Malcolm X’s thought in his artwork, depicting American troops being sent into battle by the imperialist system (characterised as a rat) before turning their guns on their oppressor – a reinterpretation of Malcolm X’s chickens coming home to roost allegory.<sup>105</sup>



<sup>100</sup> Halisi (ed.), *Quotable* p. 14. See also p. 19.

<sup>101</sup> Brown, ‘Us Organization’ p. 128; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1991) p. 229.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement for the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1990) pp. 365-366; Seale, *Seize* pp. 120-121 include recollections of this event.

<sup>103</sup> Huey P. Newton, ‘In Defense of Self-Defense’ *The Black Panther* 3 July 1967 in Morrison (ed.), *To Die* p. 90. See also Newton’s invocation of Malcolm X’s field Negro/house nigger analogy in Huey P. Newton, ‘To the Black Movement’ *The Black Panther* 15 May 1968 *ibid.* pp. 93-94.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, *The Black Panther* 7 December 1968 p. 7.

<sup>105</sup> Reproduced in Foner (ed.), *Black Panthers Speak* p. 221.

However, as the party moved away from black nationalism, Malcolm X's thought became less important. His refusal to engage with Marxism and Fanonism rendered his thought too vague for the BPP's liking. Whilst George Breitman, in editing *Malcolm X Speaks*, attempted to establish Malcolm X's socialist sympathies, Newton and Seale's reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* revealed a different man. Although his equivocal stance on violence remained central to BPP philosophy, his personal association with black nationalism – despite his rejection of it in the wake of his *hajj* – was deemed too close to Karenga's call for black unity above class solidarity. As Fanon argued, 'nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme,' it was merely a step towards political and social consciousness.<sup>106</sup> Nor was Malcolm X's mystical conception of Africa as a cultural and spiritual homeland appropriate to the strident realism of BPP doctrine. Thus Malcolm X's slightly vague and incomplete thought gave way to the more specific – and revolutionary – work of Fanon and Mao.<sup>107</sup> For the BPP, Malcolm X had more use as an example of black fortitude and militancy than as a political thinker.

Another important influence on the BPP was Robert F. Williams. Huey Newton's confession that Williams inspired the BPP focused solely on Williams' advocacy of armed self-defence. Newton devoured *Negroes With Guns* and must have been impressed with Williams' description of the rabid, yet oddly impotent fury of the Monroe white community when it came into contact with armed blacks.<sup>108</sup> It certainly helps to explain Newton's *chutzpah* when faced with a crowd of belligerent observers

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<sup>106</sup> Fanon, *Wretched* p. 163.

<sup>107</sup> Richard H. King argues that Fanon's appeal was reflected in his demonstration that theoretical work – something that late 1960s black radicals were unable to produce – 'could retain something of the immediacy... and remain relevant to concrete, popular struggles.' Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 177.

<sup>108</sup> Particularly notable was one elderly white man who became so overcome with rage and shame at the sight of black resistance that he had to be led away in floods of tears. Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, new edition 1998) pp. 9-12.

and local police. Newton, however, was unaware of Williams' radio broadcasts and his use of African American culture as a weapon.<sup>109</sup>

Despite traditional Cuban inefficiency and attempts by the Postmaster General to ban it from the US mail, *The Crusader*, which regularly featured Williams' poetry, continued to be distributed in the United States, keeping Williams' profile high in black nationalist circles.<sup>110</sup> Between July and December 1965, a drama based on *Negroes With Guns* played in Watts, Los Angeles. Gerald Horne notes that *Radio Free Dixie* was being broadcast in the area during 1964 and 1965, which led some to blame the riots on Williams.<sup>111</sup> In 1965, following the demise of *Radio Free Dixie* amid increasing pressure from the Cuban Communist Party to toe the party line, Williams left for China.<sup>112</sup> Whilst there, Williams called for black artists to adopt Maoist practices (as he had), alleging that artists who refused to take up the revolutionary mantle were 'intellectual prostitute[s].' 'Black talent,' he charged, 'must be channeled and utilized in a conscious and organized effort to liberate, inspire and remold the souls of our people.'<sup>113</sup> He asserted that, 'in our life-and death struggle, we must convert everything possible into a weapon of defense and survival... we must use the school, the church,

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<sup>109</sup> Newton with Blake, *Revolutionary* p. 112; Bobby Seale oral testimony in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices* p. 356. Perhaps *Radio Free Dixie* did not reach the Bay Area. Williams certainly felt that Radio Havana prevented him broadcasting on its short-wave facilities that would have enabled the show to reach that far. However, in his unpublished autobiography, Williams mentions that the Pacifica radio station based in California recorded and broadcast some of his shows. Williams letter to Castro, 28 August 1966 pp. 1-2, 4-5. Robert C. Cohen papers, SHSW box 1 folder 5. Hereafter cited as RCP. Robert F. Williams, 'And God Lay Sleeping' unpublished manuscript p. 203. Collection of Professor Timothy B. Tyson. More thanks to Professor Tyson for granting access to this source.

<sup>110</sup> Robert F. Williams letter to Fidel Castro, 28 August 1966 p. 5. The attempt at censorship provoked Williams to accuse the US Postmaster General of a 'fascist-like action' that contravened even 'America's consistency of hypocrisy.' Robert F. Williams, press release, 21 September 1967. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1965-1970, Library of Congress microfilm part 3 reel 3 frame 0019. See also *The Crusader* 9,2 (September-October 1967) p. 16; *The Crusader* 9,4 (March 1968) p. 15; *The Crusader* 10,2 (summer 1969) p. 23.

<sup>111</sup> *The Crusader* 6,4 (April-May 1965) p. 7; Horne, *Fire* pp. 265, 268; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) p. 291.

<sup>112</sup> Robert F. Williams, interview with Robert C. Cohen transcript pp. 846-847. RCP box 1 folder 11.

<sup>113</sup> Robert F. Williams, 'Reconstitute Afro-American Art to Remold Black Souls' *The Crusader* 8,1 (July 1967) p. 5.



the arts.’<sup>114</sup> His Maoism and rejection of African post-colonialist thought would have pleased the BPP. Both Williams and the BPP felt that revolutionary art played a beneficial role in the struggle and were sceptical of the utilisation of Africa as a palliative point of reference. Williams welcomed interest in African culture and history, but warned blacks to ‘be profound and thorough in our studies,’ and learn the lessons of African history – in particular that of the African chiefs who sold their own people into slavery.<sup>115</sup> Although he felt that all African Americans should experience Africa, he shied away from the African mythicism of the cultural nationalists, feeling that it might become a diversion from the political reality of being black in America. African Americans needed their own culture: African culture could be a useful corrective to the pernicious influence of European culture, but could not be the only culture.<sup>116</sup>

The BPP’s philosophical differences with Us emerged out of their respective programmes and attitudes to violence. Karenga scoffed at the BPP free breakfast and clinic programmes and chuckled that state welfare and Medicare already provided these services. Meanwhile, the BPP grumbled about pork-chop nationalists and sneered at Karenga’s willingness to meet with white power brokers.<sup>117</sup> Heterogeneity, however, was difficult to celebrate at a time when propaganda and counter-propaganda was widespread and the FBI was ensuring that tensions remained at boiling point.<sup>118</sup> At UCLA, both organisations competed for influence, leading to bloodshed. The irony of the January 1969 murders of Black Panthers “Bunchy” Carter and John Huggins was

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<sup>114</sup> Robert F. Williams, ‘Kangarooism: The Plague of Bigoted Justice’ *The Crusader* 9,4 (March 1968) p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> Robert F. Williams, ‘USA: The New Auction Block’ *The Crusader* 9,4 (March 1968) pp. 4-5; see also Robert F. Williams, ‘Africa and the African-American’ *The Crusader* 10,1 (November 1968) pp. 9-11.

<sup>116</sup> Robert F. Williams, interview with Robert Cohen, 23 July 1968 pp. 16, 22-26. RCP box 1 folder 4. Williams interview with Cohen pp. 39-40. RCP box 1 folder 12. *ibid.* cassette 4 track B part 2 pp. 21-22, 24-25. RCP box 2 folder 1.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, ‘Us Organization’ p. 270; Huey P. Newton, ‘To The Black Movement’ *The Black Panther* 15 May 1968 in Morrison (ed.), *To Die* p. 93; Bobby Seale interview, *The Black Panther* 3 March 1969 p. 10; Lee Lockwood, *Conversation With Eldridge Cleaver* (New York: Delta, 1970) p. 112.

<sup>118</sup> Brown, ‘Us Organization’ pp. 302-310; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) pp. 41-43, 80.

that both were apparently attempting to build bridges between the two organisations.<sup>119</sup> Their deaths signalled the nominal end of Karenga's involvement in community organising and pushed Us towards a more paranoid focus on arming itself for protection and security.<sup>120</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the UCLA shooting, the BPP devoted much space to critiques of Karenga and cultural nationalists, whom they now blamed for all the ills within the African American protest movement. A *Wall Street Journal* article, which suggested that Karenga was in the thrall of the white power structure, was reprinted in *The Black Panther*.<sup>121</sup> George Murray, the BPP Minister of Education reaffirmed that 'the only culture worth keeping is the revolutionary culture.' Essentially a reiteration of the Fanonist stance, Murray's article stated that, 'the police fear brothers and sisters who wear naturals, but the natural is not a gun... Use the gun. Kill the pig everywhere.'<sup>122</sup> Linda Harrison also denounced the political naïveté and adherence to capitalism of the cultural nationalists, citing Fanon in her attack on Karenga.<sup>123</sup> One month later, Murray's position had moved even further. He asserted that the BPP 'must destroy all cultural nationalism,' which was a 'bourgeois-capitalist scheme to confuse the masses.'<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Bobby Seale snarled 'a cultural nationalist is a fool. The white racist power structure will holler "black capitalism" and just because the word black is

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<sup>119</sup> Brown, *Taste* p. 144 unconvincingly asserts that Carter ordered the Los Angeles BPP to refrain from criticising other black groups. Scot Brown's interviews with Us members James Doss-Tayari, James Mtume and Daryl Tukufu are slightly more believable. Brown, 'Us Organization' p. 300.

<sup>120</sup> Some left Us to continue the effort to organise around cultural nationalism in Baraka's Committee For Unified Newark. Brown, 'Us Organization' pp. 304, 315-320, 323-324.

<sup>121</sup> 'The Wall Street Journal Exposes Karenga.' Brian Ward argues that this contempt for cultural nationalism derives from the rise of Eldridge Cleaver within the party's hierarchy. However, Emory Douglas recalls that Cleaver was keen to promote and even contributed ideas for subjects of his work, which suggests otherwise. Brian Ward, 'Jazz and Soul, Race and Class, Cultural Nationalists and Black Panthers: A Black Power Debate Revisited' in Brian Ward (ed.), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) pp. 179-180; Douglas interview.

<sup>122</sup> George Murray, 'For a Revolutionary Culture' *The Black Panther* 2 February 1969 p. 7. Murray had previously acted in a play directed by Amiri Baraka. Baraka, *Autobiography* p. 352.

<sup>123</sup> Linda Harrison, 'On Cultural Nationalism' *The Black Panther* 2 February 1969 in Foner (ed.), *Black Panthers Speak* pp. 151-154.

<sup>124</sup> George Murray, 'Cultural Nationalism' *The Black Panther* 3 March 1969 p. 4.

on the front of capitalism he relates to it.<sup>125</sup> Under the almost constant barrage of BPP propaganda, Us simply maintained that culture was the only viable organisational tool. The organisation failed to make a clear definition of the political philosophy of cultural nationalism and, in failing to do so, accelerated its organisational demise.

The BPP's rhetoric masks the fact that its policy remained essentially static. It could not afford to place culture at the forefront of its propaganda during 1969, since it would have handed Karenga the upper theoretical hand. In addition, it would have rendered the deaths of Carter and Huggins even more pointless. Revolutionary culture, as defined by Fanon, however, was still fundamental to the advancement of the revolution. A long article in *The Black Panther* on the competing tendencies of cultural and revolutionary nationalism concluded that black cultural nationalism had been a positive force and that its crucial failing, as exemplified in the experience of Marcus Garvey, was its mistaken reliance on capitalism rather than its cultural politics.<sup>126</sup> Emory Douglas remained as Minister of Culture and his artwork remained prominent in *The Black Panther*. In September 1969, Douglas asserted that revolutionary culture was a natural outgrowth of the liberation struggle. He stated that it 'transcends communities and racial lines because all oppressed people can relate to revolutionary change, which is the starting point for developing a revolutionary culture.'<sup>127</sup> In October 1969, *The Black Panther* announced that an album of 'Revolutionary Music' by Elaine Brown was to be released. Although the BPP maintained that Brown was first 'and foremost' a revolutionary, it suggested that Brown's songs were a useful addition to the revolutionary canon.<sup>128</sup> Within one year, the BPP formed its own singing group, aptly named The Lumpen.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Bobby Seale interview, *The Black Panther* 3 March 1969 p. 10. See also 'Bobby Seale Talks to *The Movement*' in Clayborne Carson and the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project (eds.), *The Movement 1964-1970* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) pp. 562-565.

<sup>126</sup> Earl Ofari, 'Cultural Nationalism vs. Revolutionary Nationalism' *The Black Panther* 11 October 1969 p. 9. Ofari extended his critique of cultural nationalism in Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Black Liberation (Cultural & Revolutionary Nationalism)* (Ann Arbor, MI: Radical Education Project pamphlet, c. 1969).

<sup>127</sup> Emory Douglas, 'On Revolutionary Culture' *The Black Panther* 13 September 1969 p. 6.

<sup>128</sup> 'Revolutionary View on Music' *The Black Panther* 18 October 1969 p. 8. Somewhat ironically, Brown wrote a song about Carter's and Huggins' deaths, prosaically entitled 'Assassination.' Bobby

## Conclusion

Although named president-in-exile of two militant black groups, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Republic of New Africa (RNA), Robert F. Williams remained a semi-mythical figure in black nationalist circles and had no direct communication with the BPP or Us. Much as Williams supported Black Power as a whole, he was reluctant to become involved in internecine warfare and rejected the BPP's call to denounce the cultural nationalists. His return to the United States in 1969, courtesy of a private flight from TWA, confirmed his incorrigible contrariness: soon after, he chose to resign from both RAM and the RNA and from front-line involvement in the struggle.<sup>130</sup>

Although the Free Southern Theater also began to withdraw from the front line of the freedom movement, its actions between 1965 and 1969 served as a template for the many black nationalist theatre groups that emerged during this period, particularly its focus on local activism and its increasing commitment to reflecting black culture. Its members went on to influence a number of aspects of the Black Arts Movement: Roscoe Orman joined the New Lafayette Theater in Harlem, Denise Nicholas joined the Greenwich Village-based Negro Ensemble Company, and Gil Moses collaborated with pioneering black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, to name just three.<sup>131</sup> However, the

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Seale was not impressed with Brown's talent, claiming that 'he knew what singing was about – and she couldn't.' Brown, *Taste* p. 185; Seale cited in James Maycock, 'Seize The Time' *The Guardian* (London) 21 August 1998 Section 2 p. 19.

<sup>129</sup> Brian Ward *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998) pp. 413–414. Emory Douglas claims that Michael Torrence of the band went on to work with Marvin Gaye in the 1970s. Douglas interview.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Cohen letter to Robert F. Williams, 13 April 1969; Robert F. Williams letter to Robert Cohen, 26 April 1969 p. 2. RCP box 1 folder 3. 'Exiled Williams Flies Back To U.S. In Special Plane' *Jet* 36,25 (25 September 1969) p. 8; Tyson, *Radio* pp. 293–299, 304–307. For Williams' post-1960s activism, Ronald J. Stephens, 'Narrating Acts of Resistance: Explorations of Untold Heroic and Horrific Battle Stories Surrounding Robert Franklin Williams's Residence in Lake County, Michigan' *Journal of Black Studies* 33,2 (May 2003) pp. 675–703.

<sup>131</sup> Williams, *Black Theatre* pp. 63, 91. Orman went on to star in a Gil Moses-directed Blaxploitation film, *Willie Dynamite*. In 1973, he joined the Children's Television Workshop cast for its groundbreaking television show, *Sesame Street*. At the time of writing, Orman has played the role of Gordon for over 30 years. He has commented that his 1960s acting experience could not prepare him for the rigours of work on *Sesame Street*: 'just the concept of talking to this green, grungy-looking rag comin' out of a trash can

FST's success was tempered by its failure to develop an audience outside New Orleans. This was partially through the end of its formal relationship with SNCC. It was also influenced by the FST's failure to acknowledge the worth of Christianity to the black South. A union with the church might have provided an alternative source of support when the FST ventured out of New Orleans. Ultimately, the FST's reluctance to engage actively with black Christianity suggests that it did not quite come to terms with the complexities of the relationship between African American culture and politics in the South. Yet, to argue that the FST should have paraded Christianity would be to ignore many other facts. Its core members were northern and not overtly religious. Soon after its relocation to New Orleans, the FST became influenced by another northern black philosophy – that of Malcolm X, who also de-emphasised the value of the Christian church. It began operating in the Desire housing project in New Orleans and became concerned with the economic realities of being black in the South. That New Orleans also reflected many Creole and otherworldly influences complicates the relationship between religion and activism in the area and in the FST. Despite its lack of success on tour, this local focus enabled the FST to weather the Black Power storm, ensuring that the organisation continued to function well into the 1970s.

In a similar concept to the FST's parallel structure, Amiri Baraka attempted to develop independent black theatre in Harlem and Newark. Baraka intended the BARTS to bring cultural programmes to the largest number of people possible, just as the FST hoped to bring theatre to the masses, and both hoped to spur the community to express itself through cultural forms and challenge its self-perception. Both organisations certainly proved that black theatre could be brought to the black community and confirmed that African Americans were not necessarily alienated from high culture – rather that economics and location played lead roles in the relationship. That both deliberately addressed their work to the freedom struggle in the United States suggests

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was totally alien to me.' Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez, Andres Chavez, *What It Is... What It Was!:* *The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures* (New York: Hyperion, 1998) pp. 62-63; Orman quoted in David Borgenicht, *Sesame Street Unpaved: Scripts, Stories, Secrets, and Songs* (New York: Hyperion, 1998) p. 122.

that the cultural aspect of Black Power emerged out of the civil rights movement just as much as it emerged as a critique of the very same movement.

Whilst many commentators accept William Van Deburg's assertion that Black Power was 'essentially cultural,' few delve deeply into the nature of this attitude.<sup>132</sup> Few also examine the BPP in a critical fashion, preferring either to celebrate the Party's successes uncritically or blankly condemn its failures.<sup>133</sup> Studying black nationalism throughout the 1960s illuminates the themes that unite Black Power with its forebears. Thorough investigation reveals a more subtle appreciation of the value of African American culture to the late 1960s freedom struggle. Thus, to understand Huey P. Newton's fascination with violence, Robert F. Williams' struggle in Monroe needs to be understood. To comprehend Ron Karenga's use of Africa, one must also evaluate Malcolm X's relationship with the motherland. Such a process prevents the inclination to simplify and thus dismiss the Us-BPP feud. A full appreciation of the theoretical background to the dispute highlights how the various tributaries of Black Power thought devolved from the same source material. It also suggests that to caricature the argument as one between political and cultural nationalists is to underestimate these common bonds.

The feud between the BPP and Us obscures more about cultural nationalism on the west coast than it illuminates. The zeal with which both organisations solidified and simplified their philosophies has led historians to extrapolate conclusions based on post-January 1969 evidence into the pre-1969 period. Only Scot Brown has acknowledged that Us initially had a sincere commitment to political organising, although his analysis is limited by his overtly pro-Karenga agenda. In truth, Us was initially more political than many accept and, throughout the period, the BPP acknowledged that a revolutionary culture was fundamental to the successful conduct of the political

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<sup>132</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 9, 306-308.

<sup>133</sup> The articles in Jones (ed.), *Reconsidered* and Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (eds.), *Liberation, Imagination, and the BPP: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001) generally fall into the former category; Pearson, *Shadow* falls into the latter.

revolution. These examples indicate that the cultural thrust that emerged in 1964 grew to be a significant aspect of late-1960s black nationalist ideology. Although the FST, the BPP, Robert F. Williams and Us came from different backgrounds, all understood that African American culture was a requisite aspect of the freedom struggle.

## Conclusion

In 1969, Amiri Baraka's play, *Slave Ship* played before a number of black audiences. An impressionistic, episodic piece about the Middle Passage, the play comprises tableaux of black suffering, resistance and ultimately liberation in lieu of a formal plot.<sup>1</sup> The first scene, set on a slave ship bound for the Americas, evokes the horrors of the Middle Passage to a soundtrack of African drumming, chanting and repeated screams. In the climax of this scene, a woman kills her child and herself while other slaves try to attack the white devils who have captured them. Scene two moves to a nineteenth century plantation. Banjos replace the African drumming and an Uncle Tom figure dances for his master. Meanwhile other slaves, including Nat Turner, plan a revolt. As the African drumming returns, the revolt is forcibly repressed after whites learn the plans from the Uncle Tom. Scene three opens with the Uncle Tom figure returning as a modern day preacher modelled on Martin Luther King. The burnt corpse of a black girl, representing the girls killed in the Birmingham 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church bombing, is placed at his feet. He tries to push the body aside with his feet while talking of how trustworthy Negroes are. Meanwhile, the drums return, accompanied by a saxophone, prompting the bodies of those killed on the slave ship and in the Turner revolt to rise up and start dancing. The cast begins to sing 'When We Gonna Rise,' which features the lyrics:

Rise, Rise, Rise  
Cut these ties, Black Man Rise...  
When we gonna rise up brother  
When we gonna rise above the sun  
When we gonna take our own place, brother  
Like the world had just begun?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bailey in 'A Report on Black Theater in America' *Negro Digest* April 1970 p. 25.



The entire cast dances *en masse* towards the preacher. Continuing to sing and dance, they surround and kill him. The cast then enters the audience and encourages the black members to dance. After the audience becomes comfortable with the destruction of the audience-actor boundary, the preacher's severed head is thrown on to the centre of the dancefloor.<sup>2</sup>

*Slave Ship* has a visceral energy that is absent from Baraka's other late 1960s plays and a cathartic ending that allows for a release of the audience's energy and anger that might have welled up during the play. Later, Baraka called the play 'flatly nationalist and antiwhite,' but this does the play a disservice.<sup>3</sup> Although the white characters are depicted as devils, their devilishness derives from their actions, rather than their race. The lack of dialogue also works to Baraka's advantage and gives the play a momentum that his more didactic plays lack. Indeed, the strength of *Slave Ship* lies in its expressionism and its appeal to the imagination.

The FST toured an intense production of *Slave Ship* in Mississippi and Louisiana during 1969 before presenting it in New York City. Directed and scored by Gil Moses, the FST used the entire theatre as a stage and encouraged group improvisation.<sup>4</sup> The fervent reactions of Louisiana and Mississippi audiences to *Slave Ship* suggest that the FST had to an extent overcome its distrust of its audiences. One audience responded so intensely that only the locked doors of the theatre prevented it from spilling out into the streets in a pageant of revolutionary fervour. Gil Moses also maintains that in some cities where the FST performed *Slave Ship*, black voter

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<sup>2</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* in Baraka, *The Motion of History And Other Plays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1978) pp. 131-145. Lyrics p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Baraka, introduction to Baraka, *Motion* p. 12. Jerry Gafio Watts calls *Slave Ship* 'one of Baraka's greatest accomplishments.' Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) p. 273.

<sup>4</sup> Clarissa Myrick Harris argues that the production of *Slave Ship* was part of a power struggle between Moses and O'Neal, in which the latter induced the former to direct the play in order that he be invited to direct again in New York City, which would necessitate his departure from the FST. Clarissa Myrick Harris, 'Mirror of the movement: The history of the Free Southern Theater as a microcosm of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements 1963-1978' (PhD thesis, Emory University, 1988) p. 134.

registration increased immediately following performances.<sup>5</sup> For the FST, *Slave Ship* was a culmination of its search for a black play that truly reflected the experience of African Americans in the South and embraced the improvisational tradition. Its triumphant performances were a fitting end to the FST's 1960s.

Even as it rejects King's influence, *Slave Ship* explicitly links the civil rights movement with the wider African American freedom struggle. That Baraka felt compelled to indict King as an Uncle Tom indicates that the author was concerned with the repercussions of the integrationist movement. *Slave Ship*, then, links the radical cultural nationalism of Baraka with the integrationist movement that the FST had earlier embraced. The FST developed out of the nonviolent movement and became influenced by SNCC's commitment to local people and Highlander's anti-dogmatic pedagogy before embracing black nationalism. Baraka's trajectory went from Beat non-interest through Cuban-inspired activism and into militant black cultural nationalism. Both arrived at their positions via Malcolm X. *Slave Ship* presents African American culture as a process through which black America could be re-awakened to its African heritage and its tradition of struggle and opposition – exactly the same message as SNCC's 1964 Summer Project. The FST's performances also overcame the North-South divide that characterised much of the 1960s movement, illustrating the national appeal of the movement. Its success in Louisiana and New York City ensured the continued survival of the FST and propelled Gil Moses to a career in film and television directing.<sup>6</sup> *Slave Ship* thus represents the confluence of many tributaries that filter into African American culture's relationship with the civil rights organisations during the 1960s.

*Slave Ship* answers a number of questions about this relationship. It suggests that there was a deep connection between African American culture and the civil rights

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<sup>5</sup> Val Ferdinand in Bailey, 'A Report' pp. 28-29; Moses cited in Watts, *Amiri* p. 217. His claims are uncorroborated.

<sup>6</sup> Moses' directing career included the 1974 Blaxploitation film *Willie Dynamite* (starring the FST's Roscoe Orman) and two episodes of the television adaptation of Alex Haley's *Roots*. Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) p. 243; Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez, Andres Chavez, *What It Is... What It Was!: The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures* (New York: Hyperion, 1998) pp. 62-63.

movement, particularly in the Black Power period. It also suggests that this culture was a battleground between integrationist and separatist factions within the movement. The history of the FST suggests that the movement engaged sincerely with secular culture and that this relationship helped to develop the late 1960s interpretation of black nationalism. From these issues and others explored in this study, two major conclusions are proposed:

**1) African American culture was a vital weapon of the civil rights movement.**

The relationship between the civil rights organisations and African American culture is much more complex than a simple equation involving the freedom songs and African American Christianity. In fact, using culture as a prism through which one views the movement suggests that its parameters extended far beyond the struggle for social and political equality. Most histories suggest that cultural protest was only a consideration during the Black Power era. In ignoring the immediate teleological development towards Black Power – and in particular the relationship between culture and the civil rights movement – such histories tend to dehistoricise and exceptionalise Black Power. Focusing on the culture of the movement aids the investigation into the roots of Black Power and suggests that Black Power emerged not only as a critique of the civil rights movement, but also out of that very same movement. For example, despite his avowal that he was no black nationalist, Robert F. Williams was hugely influential on late 1960s black nationalism. Williams' militant posture developed out of his experiences in the movement. To ignore his close relationship with the NAACP, SNCC and the southern protests of the late 1950s and early 1960s is to wrench him out of context. SNCC's adoption of black nationalism was similarly influenced by its organising experiences before 1965. The 1964 Summer Project was a crucible for SNCC's nascent disillusionment with liberalism and the focus of the freedom school curriculum on black culture offers a glimpse of the future direction of black radicalism in the United States. John Lewis and Don Harris's meeting with Malcolm X in Nairobi was particularly

notable for the proximity between their respective viewpoints. The example of the FST is instructive in that it attempted to develop its conception of black nationalism in Louisiana, rather than in a northern urban centre. This point urges a further reconsideration of Black Power as a truly national phenomenon.

Most movement participants acknowledge the value of the freedom songs to the civil rights movement. ‘You see why this is a singing movement?’ asked James Forman in 1963. ‘The songs help. Without them, it would be ugly. Ugly.’<sup>7</sup> Forman is correct to emphasise the beauty that the freedom songs brought to the mass demonstrations and that they provided a valuable counterpoint to segregationist violence and brutality. They undoubtedly provided an oasis of optimism for many protesters amidst the desolation of frequent beatings and jailing. Yet Forman misses the deeper meanings of the freedom songs. As Bernice Reagon argues, they incorporated and reflected the life of the black community. For her, music ‘is a basic fabric... of the community life... music was an integral part of the movement.’<sup>8</sup> As her substitution of the word ‘freedom’ for ‘trouble’ in the spiritual ‘Over My Head (I See Trouble in the Air)’ indicates, the freedom songs had a political message that was clear to their singers. The songs not only beautified the movement, they also provided it with another political expression. Furthermore, the freedom songs linked the movement with its heritage. Martin Luther King observed that ‘they are as old as the history of the Negro in America... We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination.’<sup>9</sup> Just as the 1964 Summer Project utilised the concept of a usable past, the freedom songs tapped into black culture to emphasise the bonds that united the African American community throughout its history.

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<sup>7</sup> James Forman quoted in John Poppy, ‘The South’s War Against Negro Votes’ *Look* 21 May 1963. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Library of Congress microfilm part 3 reel 2 frame 0269. Hereafter cited as SCLC.

<sup>8</sup> Bernice Reagon, interview with Therese Spaude, 27 January 1982 side 1. State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) cassette 1303A.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964) p. 61.

King's statement might disguise the fact that the SCLC's attitude towards culture in the movement was suffused with religion. Even many of its explicitly secular acts were defined in terms of their religious aura. As Septima Clark confessed, 'voter registration is a ministerial act to me.'<sup>10</sup> Andrew Young's 1967 statement that the church was black culture defines the SCLC's relationship with African American culture. Throughout this period, even as the SCLC was coming to terms with the new mood of black youth that insisted on a psychological concept of freedom, the organisation maintained that the Christian church was all the culture that black America needed. Psychological freedom could not be attained without Christianity. Even though King aligned himself with Aretha Franklin's demand for Respect, he did so mainly because Franklin herself was steeped in the gospel tradition and often admitted that she had, in fact, never left the church.

For SNCC, the entire movement was more than simply a political or religious phenomenon. Field secretary Sandy Leigh recalled the organisation adopting a principle in 1963 that 'demonstrations shouldn't be mere marching up and down the street, clapping our hands and singing; that if a demonstration was going to be worth anything, it had to have an educational value.'<sup>11</sup> This educational aspect of SNCC's work was most successfully demonstrated in the 1964 Summer Project. Richard H. King notes that the freedom schools and citizenship schools were 'powerful models for more permanent structures of political education and mobilization.'<sup>12</sup> However, to suggest that the legacy of the 1964 Summer Project was limited to the political sphere is to ignore the educational processes that SNCC engaged with. Fannie Lou Hamer maintained that this educational focus that encouraged poor, ill-educated southern blacks to see

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<sup>10</sup> Septima Clark, letter to Ralph Abernathy, 31 April 1965. SCLC part 2 reel 17 frame 0199.

<sup>11</sup> Sandy Leigh, interview with Anne Romaine, Washington DC, November 1966 p. 98. Papers of Anne Romaine, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill folder 54.

<sup>12</sup> Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 165.

themselves as human beings was SNCC's greatest success.<sup>13</sup> One of the foundations of the freedom school curriculum was the knowledge and experience of black Mississippians, which would be used to extend discussions of history into the present. Through this process, African American history was presented as a living and, indeed, usable history with direct relevance to, and parallels with, the 1960s struggle. For Staughton Lynd, this experimental approach to learning that acknowledged the worth of southern black culture was one of the major legacies of the civil rights movement.<sup>14</sup> This approach firmly validated the worth of the culture of the black South.

This, though, was not a true innovation. SNCC's methods relied to a large extent on the pedagogic techniques pioneered at the Highlander Folk School. Highlander insisted that the key to overcoming oppression lay in the decisions of the oppressed. It based its seminars on the same existential approach that defined SNCC's freedom schools. Highlander was also steeped in the African American singing tradition. Its music programme was fundamental to the school's operation. Song transcended the intellectual and rational to access people's emotions and feelings, and was conducted as a group activity to engender a sense of community.<sup>15</sup> For Highlander, folk culture played a central role in resisting oppression.

The FST was the most important organisation in the 1960s to stress the symbiotic relationship between the movement and African American culture. As John O'Neal argued, 'politics is to art as content is to form... one cannot exist without the other... Art is dominated by and is an expression of politics.'<sup>16</sup> The FST believed that political action could be stimulated by art. It was convinced that the African American

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<sup>13</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, interview with Emily Stoper in Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (New York: Carlson, 1989) p. 308.

<sup>14</sup> Staughton Lynd, introduction to Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) pp. 5-6; Staughton Lynd, 'Freedom Summer: A Tragedy, Not a Melodrama' *ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> See anon, 'Music' Highlander Research and Education Center records, SHSW box 65 folder 7. Hereafter cited as HREC. The prose style and references within the document suggest that the author is Myles Horton.

<sup>16</sup> John O'Neal, 'As a Weapon is to Warfare...' *Callaloo* 11,13 (February to October 1981) p. 66.

population was, at heart, instinctively cultural. As Tom Dent put it, 'the ingredients of theater are already strongly implanted in our culture... We are not and have not been a reading people... theater can transcend this.'<sup>17</sup> Dent and the FST were convinced that the black church and black music were the prime examples of this latent cultural element and therefore, it was the task of the FST 'to get what's in the church and what's in the music and begin to make these things happen in theater.'<sup>18</sup> Dent's suggestion reveals a paradox in the history of the FST. It failed to come to terms with the value of the church to the black population. Although the FST declared its southern identity from its inception, many of its members were from the North and few held a Christian faith. Although the FST ended its formal relationship with the civil rights movement soon after the 1964 Summer Project, it remained reliant on movement audiences for its continued viability. Its failure to entice the support of the black church left another vacuum in its support base.

Tom Dent's 1969 recollection that, two years earlier, the FST 'had to be an all-black thing,' is highly significant.<sup>19</sup> Although he overemphasises the extent to which the FST's rejection of integration was inevitable, he also suggests that the FST predicted the racial mores of many black nationalist theatre groups that were forming at this time. As O'Neal trumpets, the FST to an extent informed the nascent Black Arts Movement.<sup>20</sup> While there is scant evidence that Amiri Baraka was directly influenced by the FST, Baraka's role as a champion of black artistic work in the community was similar to that of the FST. Just as the FST tried to establish community theatre in the South, Baraka tried to stimulate black theatre in the North. His theatrical work united black politics,

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<sup>17</sup> Dent letter to O'Neal 19 July 1967 p. 2. The Free Southern Theater Records, 1963-1978, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University microfilm reel 4 box 11 folder 21. See also Dent interview with Kim Lacy-Rogers, 25 June 1968. Kim Lacy-Rogers – Glenda Stevens collection, Amistad Center, Tulane University, cassette #40.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Dent, interview with Robert Wright, Mississippi 12 August 1969 RJB480 p. 14. Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University. Hereafter cited as RJOHC.

<sup>19</sup> Dent interview with Robert Wright, 12 August 1969 RJB480 pp. 5, 19. RJOHC.

<sup>20</sup> John O'Neal, 'A Road Through The Wilderness' in Annemarie Bean (ed.), *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 98; Watts, *Amiri* p. 3.

history and culture, and gave clear indications as to his changing political sensibilities. That the writing descended into crude hectoring was less the point for Baraka than the fact that it was transmitting ideology to the black mass(es). Furthermore, Baraka's interpretation of free jazz as a political expression emphasised that African American politics and culture existed in tandem with each other.

Robert F. Williams also made much use of jazz after his escape from North Carolina. *Radio Free Dixie* was steeped in the African American protest culture. Williams later wrote, 'the purpose of *Radio Free Dixie* was not for entertainment or escapism, it was to agitate and motivate.'<sup>21</sup> He did not simply use music to assault his listeners but deliberately played records that stimulated the minds of his audience. Alongside Ornette Coleman's polyphonic spree, Williams played freedom songs and Nina Simone's political work. He read slave spirituals and his own poetry to punctuate and accentuate the songs in between delivering his trademark verbal assaults on white America. Williams deliberately emphasised the political message of African American culture in order to increase the urgency of his words and suggest that all of black America was straining at the leash for freedom.

Williams' influence on the Black Panther Party was largely in terms of his pragmatic attitude towards violence. Similarly, the BPP initially took much inspiration from Malcolm X. BPP theoreticians spent little time examining Malcolm X's 1964 and 1965 speeches when they were deciding on the organisation's direction. They primarily utilised Malcolm X as the supreme example of the field nigger to scare liberals and the civil rights establishment. Once it began to move away from overt black nationalism, the BPP slowly denuded itself of Malcolm X's imprint. Karenga and his supporters took much more notice of Malcolm X's interest in black culture and, as their feud escalated, both camps decided to solidify and simplify their positions, in order to differentiate themselves from the other. Thus the BPP all but abandoned Malcolm X in favour of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert F. Williams, 'And God Lay Sleeping' unpublished manuscript p. 198. Collection of Professor Timothy B. Tyson.



Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara and Us swept their political programme under their African rugs. Ron Karenga's insistence that cultural unity took precedence over political unity was more in tune with Malcolm X's later sentiments. As the radical black cultural nationalist journal *Soulbook* noted, 'Malcolm recognized that Black People have had our cultural roots destroyed... Because of this, we have developed a lack of self-confidence.'<sup>22</sup> Following Malcolm X's lead, the west coast cultural nationalists argued that to rebuild black self-identity, the black community needed to unite around its unique culture. Despite this largely rhetorical difference, the BPP retained considerable cultural cachet: Emory Douglas and Earl Anthony are candid in admitting that they were initially attracted more by the BPP's image than its substance.<sup>23</sup> Douglas's position within the party is a simple indication that the BPP did not completely abandon its cultural focus during its war with Us. And, as black artist Tom Feelings observes, the only civil rights organisation to use an artist to his or her full potential was the BPP.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Michele Allen, amongst many others, fails to come to terms with the BPP's cultural policy when she argues that the revolutionary nationalists negated culture to the detriment of their revolution.<sup>25</sup> William Van Deburg questions whether the BPP was contradicting its revolutionary nationalist standpoint by appointing a Minister for Culture.<sup>26</sup> His reductive definition of the BPP as revolutionary nationalists overemphasises Malcolm X's influence. Whilst the BPP was not as forthcoming in promoting African American culture as a political weapon, it cannot be argued that it simply ignored black culture. A full understanding of the feud with Karenga is crucial to an understanding of this issue.

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<sup>22</sup> *Soulbook* 2,2 (no date, c. spring 1967) p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas interview; Earl Anthony, *Picking Up The Gun: A Report on the Black Panthers* (New York: Dial Press, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> Tom Feelings, interview with Malaika Lumumba, Brooklyn, 29 January 1970 RJB496 p. 6. RJBOHC.

<sup>25</sup> Michele P. Allen, interview with Robert Wright, San Francisco, 16 November 1968 RJB345 pp. 31-32. RJBOHC.

<sup>26</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 175, 155-167. Van Deburg's definition of the BPP as a revolutionary nationalist organisation also underplays the BPP's rejection of black nationalism and overemphasises the Party's early conception of struggle.

Close examination of the cultural aspect of the civil rights movement reveals that seemingly disparate strands were, in fact, intertwined. Highlander pioneered citizenship education, convinced the SCLC of the efficacy of utilising folk culture as an educational tool and revealed the value of culture to SNCC. SNCC, in turn, influenced CORE's move away from explicitly political organising. The FST also emerged from SNCC and both incorporated black nationalist thought. Robert F. Williams encouraged Amiri Baraka to become involved in political activism. Baraka then went on to influence the FST, Us and the Black Panther Party, who were also influenced by Williams and Malcolm X. As the movement turned radical, even the SCLC came to the conclusion that culture was a necessary tool in the struggle.

The qualifying point that stems from this issue is that there are certain limitations to the use of culture in a social movement. The civil rights movement was no different: culture was not as widespread or as deep as it would be tempting to conclude, and was not the over-riding interest of movement activists. Most obviously, the SCLC was restricted by its insistence that religion was all the culture that black America needed. Financial considerations also limited the organisations' use of culture. SNCC, in particular, was never able to reproduce the success of the 1964 freedom schools. Although many individuals were committed to continuing the schools, few actually managed to do so without the financial and organisational investment that ensured the success of the 1964 Summer Project. Between 1965 and 1969, neither SNCC nor CORE were able to commit the finances to large-scale organising initiatives and both became more involved with increasing their media profile at the expense of less glamorous grassroots work. A focus on the culture of the movement cannot provide the definitive answer as to why the organisations suffered such a loss of support and finance in the period after 1964. That the two went in tandem might suggest that the cultural focus was of little interest within the black community. However, the equation (again) is more complex and involves many other factors such as the attitude of the black middle class, the white establishment and white society. A focus on culture did much to address

psychological issues within the black community but did little to solve the economic realities of the same situation.

Ultimately, all the major civil rights organisations were occupied in addressing political and social inequality. Whilst all, to a greater or lesser degree, acknowledged that culture was important, only Us felt that it transcended all other considerations. Thus, the temptation to over-emphasise the role that culture played in the 1960s freedom struggle should be resisted. An over-riding focus on culture might lead to a conclusion that de-politicises the movement. Nevertheless, African American culture pervaded many aspects of the 1960s African American freedom struggle and provides for a useful interpretative tool. The link with identity is important, for the movement was not solely concerned with political and social equality. The many forms of culture that interacted with the movement provided crucial adjuncts to civil rights protests. Dick Gregory's comedy is one example of African American culture becoming a pressure valve for the community, in addition to its insistence on black equality. One of the central concerns of the freedom school curriculum was with normalising black culture and identity, while SNCC activists were attempting to boost black voter registration. To understand the civil rights movement fully, African American culture and identity must be appreciated as part of the movement's weaponry.

**2) An investigation of the relationship between the movement and African American culture suggests that 1964 should be appreciated as the year in which the movement began to transform itself.**

This cultural approach also urges a reconsideration of the relationship between Black Power and the period immediately prior to Malcolm X's assassination. The period incorporating Malcolm X's death, the Watts Riot and the successful passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act is often taken to be the turning point of the civil rights movement,

when it began to focus on the North.<sup>27</sup> A thorough examination of 1964 suggests that the major civil rights organisations underwent a shift of emphasis during this year. CORE and the SCLC experienced subtle shifts. Both looked to the North to continue their struggle and elements within each organisation also began to consider Africa's influence seriously. CORE also became increasingly drawn towards SNCC's organising style. Whilst it would be overstating the case to argue that the 1964 Summer Project acted as an incubator for the latent black nationalist tendencies within SNCC, the Project certainly convinced many SNCC activists of the inherent duplicity of American liberalism and that black culture was a viable organising tool.

Malcolm X's rhetoric also struck a nerve with many SNCC activists. His insistence that American politics were corrupt and his increasing fascination with Africa as a spiritual destination combined neatly with SNCC's direction. Emily Stoper is perhaps guilty of hyperbole when she argues that his influence on SNCC 'cannot be exaggerated,' but she is correct to note that during 1964, SNCC became increasingly interested in Malcolm X's message of black pride and in his particular personal style.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, Malcolm X's house Negro/field nigger analogy can be compared with SNCC's focus on local people and its insistence that true or pure black culture was the preserve of poor blacks in the Deep South. SNCC workers' tendency to wear overalls

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<sup>27</sup> For example, William Van Deburg and Clayborne Carson suggest that the death of Malcolm X heralded a new phase in African American political thought. Taylor Branch concludes the second volume of his narrative history with the reaction to the death of Malcolm X and King's promise to force the passage of a voting bill, suggesting that this was the end of the movement's national phase. Adam Fairclough interprets the Voting Rights Act as the 'crowning achievement' of the movement and suggests a story of decline afterwards. Robert Weisbrot presents the Selma campaign and the federal response as the zenith of the movement. Robert Cook sees 1964 as a year of transition although he also sees the movement in decline after the Voting Rights Act. William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) esp. pp. 1-10; Clayborne Carson, 'Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era' in Brian Ward and Tony Badger (eds.), *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) pp. 115-127; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) pp. 596-600; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) pp. 253 (quote), 253ff; Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin, 2001) pp. 293ff; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1990) pp. 127-153; Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 1998) pp. 144-216.

<sup>28</sup> Stoper, *Student* p. 112.

and denim was only one way to demonstrate their affinity with such people.<sup>29</sup> Malcolm X's increasing interest in international relations and his invocation of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights certainly coincided with SNCC's growing interest in Africa. If Don Harris is correct to assert that 'there was always a fairly strong [black] nationalist element in SNCC. It was sublimated. It was under the covers as such, but it was already there,' then 1964 brought these feelings to the surface.<sup>30</sup>

The BPP's quest for a revolution of values within the black community can be paralleled with the moderate civil rights movement's insistence that it was not only challenging white America but also black America. In this sense, the Black Power movement can be seen within the historical development of black protest in the United States. Throughout the period, organisations maintained that self-development – often through African American culture – was one of the central aims of the African American freedom struggle. Within all these developments, Malcolm X's transformation during 1964 is crucial. Late 1960s black nationalism was indebted to Malcolm X's rejection of the Nation of Islam's rigid doctrine, his discovery of internationalism and his introspection. To argue therefore, that the period immediately after his death is of vital importance is to ignore this important period that also encompasses the first concrete indications that Martin Luther King and the moderate movement were shifting their focus to the northern states.

This leads to the suggestion that Black Power should not be divorced from the civil rights movement. In shifting the turning point of the movement back to 1964, the two supposedly discrete movements can be reconciled. The utility of this conclusion has many benefits for the history of the 1960s. It presents the development of Black Power not as an aberration but as a response to the questions posed by the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. As black culture became more important to the

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<sup>29</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 71-72; Stoper, *Student* pp. 21, 34. Conversely, Van Deburg de-emphasises SNCC's interest in Malcolm X in 1964. Van Deburg, *New Day* pp. 48-51.

<sup>30</sup> Don Harris, interview with Emily Stoper in Stoper, *Student* p. 169.

movement, particularly to SNCC during the 1964 Summer Project, the role of whites, for example, came under question. Similarly, the actions of black radicals such as Robert F. Williams, Amiri Baraka and Donald Warden prior to the death of Malcolm X suggests that important tributaries of black nationalist thought were flowing in the early 1960s. Focusing on 1964 returns agency to the civil rights movement and prevents a normative interpretation of the movement that proposes the actions of the federal government as the prime indicator of American values. As Charles Payne notes, this normative position prevents a full understanding of how a social movement can be a transforming experience for its participants or can be a culture in itself.<sup>31</sup> Studying the culture of the civil rights movement, then, offers an interpretation that illustrates how change occurs within a social movement.

African American culture was an integral force within the civil rights movement. It was consciously used by activists during the 1960s to reinforce the movement's political and social agenda. As a result of its use during the mid-period of the movement, it became a rallying cry for the Black Power generation. To divorce 'Civil Rights' from 'Black Power' is to ignore the historical continuities that unite them. To focus entirely on the movement's political and social campaign is to ignore a significant portion of its message to black America.

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Payne, 'Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches' in Steven Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) p. 110.

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