

Freedom on Film: New Directions in Civil Rights Research and Pedagogy

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One of the most charismatic and memorable figures of the Civil Rights era was Ella Baker, who worked as a field officer for the NAACP in the 1940s, and, as a cofounder of the SCLC, coordinated its Atlanta office throughout the late 1950s. In 1960 Baker left the SCLC to facilitate the launch of SNCC, the student-led arm of the Movement, where she manifested a vision of group-centered leadership that contemporary social scientists have labeled “participatory democracy.” SNCC became the fulcrum for Baker’s form of social activism that privileged grassroots involvement by members of local communities, minimized emphasis on individual leaders, and pushed community members to take direct, collective action—marching, voting, boycotting—to empower themselves and improve their situations.

Forty years later, a team of students and professors at our University is undertaking a project to explore how Baker’s model, and other tenets of Civil Rights activism, may have been appropriated by Georgians, not only during the 1950s and 1960s, but also in the 1970s and 1980s, the Movement’s aftermath. Our online project, entitled “Freedom on Film,” is part of a larger project called the Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative, funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal organization [**CRDL Chart**]. The Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative includes over forty librarians, computer programmers, students, and educators, all collaborating to create a database that will house Civil Rights-era news footage generously donated to our

special collections from WSB-TV/Channel 2 in Atlanta and WALB-TV/Channel 10 in Albany.

Presently, researchers and teachers can only access this film by physically traveling to The University of Georgia's Walter J. Brown Media Archives. However, when the Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative is completed in 2008, the film will be available online through a portal or gateway that will also enable users to access, and search all at once, multiple Civil Rights databases throughout the Southeast, including sites launched by the Atlanta Regional Council of Higher Education, Emory University and the University of Southern Mississippi, and the Foot Soldier Project for Civil Rights Studies at The University of Georgia. The instructional component of the portal that we are developing, "Freedom on Film," is geared to students and teachers at both college and K-12 levels, and intends to catalyze discussion of Georgia's Civil Rights history in the classroom [**Opening slideshow and back-up handouts**].

Our project, "Freedom on Film," operates from the premise that local histories offer students compelling and thoughtful ways to think about national or global events, and to consider the relevance of such events to their own lives. We are analyzing and sifting through old news reels to find video clips that depict Movement activities in nine Georgia places—Atlanta, Albany, Americus, Athens, Augusta, Rome, Macon, Columbus, and Savannah. All of these places differ in landscapes, economies, histories, and populations, and thus reflect the diversity that characterizes this state. And as such, we've also found that each employed different strategies of activism. From teenagers and SCLC support in Albany, to young children in Americus, to board rooms and civic club lunches in Atlanta, each city's unique composition offers a unique slice of the Movement.

To further emphasize this diversity, every city page will feature an average of 7-10 clips that depict events from the Civil Rights era, supported by lesson plans, bibliographies, interviews that we have conducted with former activists, and other resources.

Courtney, Lauren, and Aggie will now walk you through clips we have selected for classroom discussion of themes and strategies illustrative of the Movement. Courtney will discuss how the Albany Movement can generate analysis of the manipulative strategies of segregationists, and the diversity among activists. Lauren will talk about how in the Movement's aftermath, black Atlantans in the 1970s sought power through political office, and how twenty-first century public intellectuals may represent a third wave of civic activism. Finally, Aggie will use the example of The University of Georgia, circa 1968, to describe the appropriation of Civil Rights tactics by the student movement, and how this appropriation challenges us to rethink assumptions about what the Movement intended and whose lives it sought to change.

[Courtney]. The first clip we're going to show is of an August 28, 1962 protest comprised of seventy-five clergymen in front of Albany's City Hall. This clip exemplifies two different groups attempting to achieve two different meanings of community. **[Run clip].** One group in this video you have just seen is the segregationists, headed by Albany Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett, who appears haughty and domineering in his attempt to get the protestors to leave. Pritchett wanted to maintain segregation and the traditional Jim Crow society. He wanted to rid Albany of "outside agitators," or northern activists, who threatened this way of life. The other group in this video consists of integrationists, mostly clergymen, who traveled to Albany to unite a divided community.

During the clergymen protest, Chief Laurie Pritchett tries to persuade the protesters to end their demonstration. His arms folded over his chest, he struts back and forth before the crowd. He speaks loudly and deliberately, emphasizing each word. He repeatedly asks the clergymen to end their protest and “disperse in the name of decency.”

One discussion question that this clip can generate in the classroom is: Why did Pritchett put on such a performance? (**Great question!**) One explanation rests in the racial and social composition of the crowd before him. During the Albany Movement, Pritchett and his policemen mostly encountered lower-middle-class black marchers. However, in this particular protest, Pritchett shares his race with most of the participants, who are Yankees but middle-class whites. Since he has self-consciously cultivated a civil, nonviolent, and calm attitude toward the black protestors, now that he stands in front of a white crowd, even though he resents them, he has to refine his attitude even more.

Another explanation for Pritchett’s performance is the fact that hundreds of white Albany citizens are watching the City Hall protest from across the street, on the porch and plaza of the New Albany Hotel. The crowd consists of Pritchett’s supporters. So the Chief also performs grandly to maintain the respect and admiration of these onlookers; he has to show them that he can diffuse potentially violent situations and silence troublemakers. He cannot afford his fellow Albany residents, other white South Georgians, and other segregationists to see Yankees come into town and challenge his power. He needs to establish that he is boss. Yet, since he is aware that television networks are filming the protest, he is very careful of his actions.

The clergymen represented here can inspire students to discuss the diversity among Civil Rights activists. During the protest, the clergymen appear unperturbed by

the police's attempt to stop them. Throughout Chief Pritchett's numerous requests that they leave, they read from the Bible and sing protest songs such as "We Shall Overcome." They remained unruffled while being handcuffed by the police and jeered by white onlookers. Where the Albany activists were usually black southerners in their teens or early twenties, most of the clergymen were white, middle-aged, northerners. Thus, their participation deepened interracial and intergenerational involvement in the Movement. Also, they introduced an interdenominational element, since they represented such faiths as Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Ironically, where segregation separated people based on skin color, events such as this protest show how segregation also brought together people of various races and religions to dismantle it.

[Lauren]. As an instructor at The University of Georgia, I often consider the implications of teaching historical and cultural contexts to a generation removed from the history under discussion. When someone mentions social activism, an image of protestors carrying signs comes to mind, but so do images of teachers, community organizers, filmmakers, and authors. One important lesson gained from Civil Rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s is that we all bear some responsibility to the world, that we all share the responsibility of questioning history and keeping our students informed about social issues. And keeping students informed no longer means simply having enough textbooks. Today, we are bombarded with information, and our greatest challenge oftentimes is selecting from a questionable crop. From websites to talk shows to The New York Times, we are a society immersed in tools that can give voice to our experiences.

Our website introduces students to unknown foot soldiers and their journeys toward freedom and equality. Using this medium, teachers will have access to different methodologies for rediscovering forgotten histories in America. While some may argue that web sites can do little to promote social activism, I would argue that such tools encourage students to take stock of their world and evaluate how history has informed their lives. The desire to change the world is admirable, but without knowledge, efforts tend to wane and go unnoticed. Our willingness to address difficult issues as teachers is the first step in the right direction towards Ella Baker's participatory activism. If I do not take the initiative to inform my students, how in good faith can I ever call myself an agent of change? We must learn to work with the hands we are dealt and develop new strategies that give voice to our experiences. If we speak out long enough, people will eventually listen.

As we will see in the following clip, Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, seized upon one of these tools to continue the trend of Civil Rights activism. **[Show clip]**. Jackson employed direct action by rising to prominence in city politics. He served diligently as Atlanta's mayor for two consecutive terms, beginning in 1973, and returned to begin a third term in 1990. During his tenure as Atlanta's leader, politics became increasingly prominent as a mechanism for changing the lives of black citizens. A generation of black leaders wielded power from within the system in order to address racially motivated issues.

The political process, however, requires elected officials to navigate a system that often opposes the best interests of the people they were elected to serve. Thus, in my classroom, I might show this clip of Jackson in order to discuss how black Americans are

perhaps entering a third wave of activism. In addition to politics, the fields of film, entertainment, and journalism are breeding outspoken consciousness-raisers dedicated to progressive social change. Instead of marching or picketing to correct deficiencies in social institutions, they use electronic media—documentaries, talk shows, the radio—to fight for social equality.

For example, Spike Lee's most recent documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), examines the social stigmas ascribed to race and class that prompted a delayed state and national response to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, and that continue to delay recovery efforts. By directing our attention to a balanced story of the sacrifices and resiliency of ordinary people unable to let go, his documentary can move viewers beyond our comfort zones in order to wrestle with social problems whose solutions are ambiguous and uncertain.

Bill Cosby's address at the NAACP's 2004 gala commemorating the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision, sparked fierce debate. He chastised impoverished African Americans who "are not holding up their end of this deal." He referenced the social and educational advances that transpired as a result of the Brown decision in order to criticize those black people that he thinks are throwing away opportunities. Similarly, in his book *Enough* (2006), journalist Juan Williams agrees with Cosby. He sums up African American youth culture by stating: "The message from TV to young black people is that they can be true to their community by putting on an angry attitude, dismissing school as a waste of time, speaking broken English, wearing flashy clothes and gold teeth, and putting dazzling rims on their rides" (219). Both Cosby and Williams identify a deterioration of education and parenting skills among African Americans,

which they condemn as root causes of black people's problems today. Yet, while they note important factors contributing to problems in black America, neither man provides sufficient solutions for improvement.

Where Mayor Jackson sought social change through politics, Lee, Cosby, and Williams are examples of a third wave of activists who use the media to raise awareness about the lives of African American experience. Their activism, and our clips, can provide a launching point for discussions of how individual success does not absolve one from individual or group responsibility. In that vein, I would argue that our website and our willingness to confront these issues as teachers are also necessary steps towards Ella Baker's participatory democracy. Our web site encourages students to take stock of their world and evaluate how history has informed their lives. Instead of simply casting blame upon individuals, we all must work together to help alleviate these situations. Those of us who benefit from the fruits of the American dream must always look back and make sure that others are not left behind.

[Aggie]. Lauren's hope that people will eventually listen is exactly what motivates the following and final clip we're going to show. **[Show clip].** I think that one of the most striking aspects of this clip, besides the glimpse we get of the groovy, grassy lifestyles of yesteryear, is the question posed by reporter Joe Abrams at the end. He asks, "Why shouldn't this kind of demonstration be sufficient to get results?" I want to follow Mr. Abram's example and use this clip as an opportunity to raise some important questions about movement research and pedagogy. But, first, some background on what's happening in the video: The year is 1968. June first. These few students are University of Georgia undergraduates protesting the prosecution of three of their peers,

one of whom, David Simpson, was president of the anti-war, student-led activist group, Students for a Democratic Society. Simpson and two other students were charged with leading a sleep-in protest on April 10, 1968, and consequently disrupting campus activities. They'd gathered between 300 and 500 people, depending on whose report you read, to march about half a mile from a campus dormitory to the Academic Building to demand equal rights for University women.

You see, at this time, male and female students at the University lived under different rules. For example, women, but not men, had strictly enforced nightly curfews, and women, but not men, were prohibited from consuming alcohol on campus, despite being of age under the law. April's demonstrations were a call to end such double standards, to turn the University from what demonstration leader David Simpson called "nothing more than a seminary and a girls' training school," into a legitimate and liberal institution of education. The April demonstrators slept in the Academic Building through two nights, evacuating on the third day on threat of arrest for breaking a fire code. By May 31, the University's Dean of Men, William Tate, suspended two leaders of the demonstration, including Simpson, and placed a third on probation. The next day, June 1, protestors erected a tent on the lawn in front of the Academic Building, christened the space they occupied "Persecution City," and stayed through the weekend. They were acting on their conviction that if the Administration was going to punish anyone, it should punish everyone, rather than targeting a few individuals.

So, in a sense, these protestors and their April predecessors are invoking the Civil Rights Movement's calls for equal treatment under the law. It's only recently, with the groundbreaking works of Charles Payne and John Dittmer, that such activities are even

included in the context of the Movement. In light of this new research that focuses on what Derrick Alridge and Maurice Daniels call “the foot soldiers” of the movement, and that expands our reach beyond the period from 1955 to 1968, our website includes the student-led activities that developed alongside the anti-war protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s. We want to emphasize that anti-war and student protestors extended the Movement’s demands that this nation fulfill its promise of liberty and justice for all. And they extended the Movement’s international focus, linking themselves to, and drawing inspiration from, liberation movements across the globe. We want to show that student activism and political involvement did not end at the lunch counter or in the Mississippi Delta, but continued as long as long as people found a cause to get behind, be it Communism, Viet Nam, or Dylan.

Including such a clip in the classroom also allows us to talk about the involvement of white persons in an era of Black Power. As Courtney suggested, white people had always been a part of the Movement, from feminist abolitionists to pre-war sociologists trying to explain the so-called “Negro Problem.” In fact, in her study of the role of public intellectuals in the Civil Rights Movement, Carol Polsgrove demonstrates that in the 1940s and early 1950s, much of the debate surrounding desegregation and racial equality actually took place in the Southern white press. Similarly, the Southern Regional Council formed in 1944 as an offshoot of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization formed by a group of white, middle-class elites who aimed to “build southern white support for interracial harmony through biracial local and state committees” (p 20). And, as Noliwe Brooks writes in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, even when people of color seized the power to speak for themselves,

for example, during the 1968 University of California system sit-ins, they organized interracial coalitions.

While the Persecution City clip can facilitate a discussion of interracial organizing, it also raises critical questions about the concept of race in the Movement. As you heard in the clip, the young man said, “We want to make it clear to everybody involved in the movement that we haven’t given up.” But is he talking about movement with a capital M or movement of a lower-case variety? Is there even a difference? Do we misunderstand the Movement by including within it the pursuits of equality, or drinking rights, or international peace, by non-black citizens? What are the consequences of labeling the entire movement a “civil rights” movement as opposed to a “movement for racial equality” as it may be more aptly described? In a 1991 article in *The Nation*, Adolph Reed and Julian Bond convincingly argue that America was founded upon the “sentiment that American life and politics would be better, neater, more pure if we could somehow get race out of it.” Are we getting race out of it by subsuming the cause for racial equality within the women’s lib or anti-war movements? Or is the umbrella grouping a necessary first step in transcending the color line? On the other hand, should we and can we transcend this line within a society in which, as Scott Saul writes, racial identity, is at once, “the thinnest of fictions” and the foundation for “the basic arrangements of American culture”?

I hope I have asked more questions than I have provided answers. I don’t believe that answers are what we should be looking for right now in this climate in which new theories and new findings daily sprout like bunnies. What might be most important at this time is that we simply continue to care enough to ask, and that we pursue projects

such as “Freedom on Film” that teach our students to ask, to wonder, to question, and to engage critically the information abounding around them. After all, it was such inquiry that gave way to the new scholarship that is no longer content with reductive theories or simplified understandings of the Movement. It is the process of asking, of engaging with our worlds, that allows us to access truths, if such exist, or to at least unearth a layer of more intelligent questions.
