



Introduction

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During his time in Detroit, C.L.R. James, the Pan-Africanist author and activist, used to invite young people to his home on Sundays, asking each of them to bring a newspaper from a different country. He wanted them to see how any event was seen differently when filtered through different national lenses. As simple an exercise as it was, he was teaching one of the most profoundly liberating of all lessons, a lesson about the partiality of viewpoints and about the way social perspectives are inevitably embedded in all ideas. Until one gets that straight, thinking with any depth about social issues is all but impossible.

In 1929, Charles Hamilton Houston (Phi Beta Kappa at Amherst and the first Black man to serve on the *Harvard Law Review*) became dean of Howard University's law school. He immediately set about making it an instrument of struggle. A lawyer, he liked to say, is either a social engineer or parasite. He fired faculty who could not keep up and flunked out students in droves. Thurgood Marshall came in with a class of 30, but graduated with a class less than half that size. Houston's motto was "No tea for the feeble, no crepe for the dead." He brought in Supreme Court justices for his students to argue before. Houston angered many people, but the cohort of lawyers who would lead the assault on the legal edifice of White supremacy was trained largely at Howard Law.

The self-conscious use of education as an instrument of liberation among African Americans is exactly as old as education among African Americans. Education for liberation can be something as simple and intellectually elegant as what James did or something as involved as the long-term institution-building that was Charlie Houston's lifework. It can be a direct assault on the citadels of privilege, or it can focus on the self-development of individuals in the hope, as Ella Baker put it, that strong people don't need strong leaders.

This book is about education for liberation among African Americans, those forms of education intended to help people think more critically about the social forces shaping their lives and think more confidently about their



ability to react against those forces. We are concerned with the variety of forms it takes, from the shadow of slavery to the contradictions of hip-hop, with its evolution and impact, with its enduring contradictions and tensions, with its interconnections with other social currents, with the role played by people not of African descent, with the difficulties organizers encounter trying to start or sustain programs, with the lessons of the past for the present moment. One of the tragedies of Black civic culture of the last several decades has been the paucity of formal opportunities for young Black people to learn to think critically about social issues. It is as if Black adults somehow decided, yes, the society is racist, but, no, Black youngsters don't need any particular guidance to learn how to negotiate and understand that society. Let them work it out. Arguably, Black America did a better job of racial socialization in the years after World War II, when NAACP youth chapters were flourishing, when segregated institutions, even when not overtly political, provided space for critical reflection and individual growth. Indeed, given the simultaneous decline of Black institutional patterns and the rise of pervasive mass media, the latter half of the 20th century probably represents something of a low point in the ability of Black Americans to create counter-narrative for the next generation.

In the last several years, however, there has been a sharp upturn of interest. The Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools have experienced steady growth, challenging the organization's capacity to meet demand. One of the ironic consequences of the small school-charter school movement is that it has opened up space in public schools for curricula that are explicitly liberatory in intent. By fall 2006, Chicago had at least 10 schools and New York had 17 schools that identified themselves as having some kind of social justice focus, most of them less than 5 years old, most serving children of color. A website devoted to the civil rights movement now gets 130,000 page views a month during the school year (www.crmvet.org). It is still too soon to say where all of this is headed, but there is clearly more interest in emancipatory education, among African Americans and others, than has been the case since the early 1970s.

Education for African Americans has always had particular political and moral resonances. "For the slaves," Theresa Perry writes, "literacy was more than a symbol of freedom; it was freedom. It affirmed their humanity, their personhood" (Perry, 2003, 13). After the Civil War, "They rushed not to the grog shop but to the schoolroom," wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1879. "They cried for the spelling-book as bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessity of life." Booker T. Washington observed that "Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. It was a whole



race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5).

In Chapter 1 of this volume, Steven Hahn says that after slavery, Black women seem to have played a particularly active part in advancing the cause of education. The same might be said of the 20th century, from Mary McLeod Bethune to the women who ran Black Panther liberation schools. Perhaps no one did more to shape an African American pedagogy of the oppressed than Septima Clark and Ella Baker.

Clark’s Citizenship Schools are paradigmatic in many ways. One of the enduring themes of education for liberation is its tendency to encourage people to play roles that they would ordinarily be prevented—by their youth, their race, gender, poverty, education, or by social convention—from playing. Clark, for example, didn’t want traditionally credentialed teachers:

I sat down and wrote out a flyer saying that the teachers we need in a Citizenship School should be people who are respected by the members of the community, who can read well aloud, and who can write their names in cursive writing. These are the ones that we looked for. . . . We were trying to make teachers out of these people who could barely read and write. But they could teach. (Brown, 1986, pp. 63–64)

In Chapter 3, David Levine notes that when one woman began speaking back to male leadership, Clark took that to be a positive benchmark, and when the leader in question learned that it was his function to encourage that kind of challenge, that was an even more important benchmark.

Emancipatory education is also intended to be transformative, which is one of the reasons shattering traditional role definitions is so important. The Citizenship Schools were intended not merely to prepare people to register to vote but to develop community leaders, people we might call “critical citizens,” following Adam Green’s usage (Payne and Green, 2003). The evaluation form in use in Mississippi in 1963 asked whether the graduate had been instrumental in getting others to vote, but it also asked whether he or she had signed petitions, attended community meetings, engaged in demonstrations, become more effective in community action, worked for any unselfish cause, or rendered more help to his or her neighbors. In other words, the form asked whether we had transformed this person. Farmers and laborers who had difficulty holding a pencil wound up opening credit unions and health centers and preschools.

Another of the enduring themes of liberatory education has been respect for the students with whom one is working, what David Levine, in Chapter 3, calls the radical affirmation of students’ dignity. One of the reasons it is important to have students involved in decision making is precisely that it



shows respect for them. Septima Clark found that her willingness to really listen to poor people gave her an advantage over even supposedly radical and sophisticated male colleagues.

One of Ella Baker's biographers, Barbara Ransby, calls Baker a radical humanist. That description would work for Clark as well. The Lakota would have called them Shirtwearers, people whose lives reflected the values and traditions of the tribe with special fidelity. Baker typically explained the development of her own politics in terms of the communal, quasi-socialist setting in which she had grown up. Clark described some of her formative influences similarly:

There are three things I felt I learned from my father. One was that he wanted you to always be truthful. Next, he wanted you not to exalt yourself, but to look at the culture of others and see whether or not you could strengthen their weaknesses and try to investigate how you could improve yourself toward them. Then, too, he talked about having Christ in your life. This is one thing that helps you to understand people better. If you can get the spirit of Christ into your life, you will learn to see others as Christ saw them and be able to live with them and help them to live with themselves. I feel that sitting around that pot-bellied stove he really gave us three very good things to look forward to—being truthful, strengthening other people's weaknesses, and seeing that there is something fine and noble in everybody. (Brown, 1986, pp. 97–98)

From their family and community backgrounds, Clark and Baker both took a deep capacity for identifying with others, a sense that our differences are not that important, that the flaws of others are no greater than our own, that people have potentials that are ordinarily hidden. No doubt, this life-affirming humanism is a part of the reason both Clark and Baker had such an impact on so many of the people with whom they worked.

The Freedom Schools established by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 were directly affected by the work of Clark and Baker. Short-lived in their original form, they became one of the most influential models for generations of subsequent organizers and educators.

SNCC entered Mississippi in the summer of 1961, and shortly thereafter, helped form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of civil rights organizations. From 1961 to 1964, SNCC-COFO waged a valiant campaign for the right to vote. The defenders of White supremacy responded with violence, sometimes lethal, against individual civil rights workers and their local allies, with constant police harassment and with wholesale firings and evictions of people thought to be associated with the movement. The federal government pretty much shrugged. For some in SNCC, the last straw was the January 1964 murder of Louis Allen. Allen



had earlier witnessed the slaying of NAACP member Herbert Lee, which probably led to his own killing. At the time Allen was killed, SNCC-COFO was in the midst of discussing the possibility of bringing large numbers of White students into the state for the subsequent summer, partly because they had noticed that when White students had been in the state, the movement got more attention from the press and the FBI. In the context of the killing of Allen and several others, something had to be done to make the federal government take a larger hand (Dittmer, 1994; Payne, 1995).

That something turned out to be the Mississippi Summer Project, bringing nearly 1,000 young people to the state, mostly White and well-to-do, the kind of people, Ella Baker noted, who could bring the concern of the nation with them. “Until the killing of black mothers’ sons is as important as the killing of white mothers’ sons,” she would say famously, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest” (Ransby, 2003, p. 335). The volunteers would be the kind of people the federal government deemed important and, in protecting them, they would also be offering some measure of protection to the activists based in the state. The volunteers were expected to run voter registration campaigns, operate community centers, and conduct Freedom Schools.

When Charlie Cobb is referred to as the inventor of the Mississippi Freedom Schools, he typically demurs, which honors the SNCC norm that although important ideas may be expressed through individuals, in fact they are ordinarily developed through group process. In this case, though, the rest of the group seems unanimous that Cobb, a Howard University student who had been in Mississippi since 1962, gave shape to the idea. Cobb’s thinking was affected by the experience the SNCC had had a year earlier when it organized Nonviolent High in Pike County, Mississippi, for students kicked out of school there by Septima Clark’s citizenship schools, which were playing an important role developing leaders in some of the Delta counties where Cobb worked and by Ella Baker herself—just her style and the way she worked with the SNCC young people. During one of the early planning sessions for the summer, Cobb proposed that the Summer Project do something to address the impoverished nature of the education typically offered to Black students in Mississippi. He wrote:

Repression is the law; oppression a way of life. . . . Here, an idea of your own is a subversion that must be squelched; for each bit of intellectual initiative represents the threat of a probe into the why of denial. Learning here means only learning to stay in your place. . . . There is hope and there is dissatisfaction. . . . This is the generation that has silently made the vow of no more raped mothers, no more castrated fathers; that looks for an alternative to a lifetime of bent, burnt, and broken backs, minds and souls. Their creativity must be molded from the rhythm of a muttered “white son-of-a-bitch;” from the roar of a hunger bloated belly and from the stench of rain and mudwashed shacks.



. . . What they must see is the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America.
(Quoted in Howe, 1984, p. 9)

Cobb wanted a component in the Summer Project that would “make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action” (Cobb, 1991, p. 36).

Getting students to see the connection “between a rotting shack and a rotting America” reflects one of the strongest themes in education for liberation, an insistence on a structural analysis of society. It is similar to what sociologists call the sociological imagination, the ability to see the connection between history and biography. As Cobb and many others in SNCC understood it, it is not just a matter of being able to critique social structures. One needs to be able to see how those structures are implicated in one’s own life, how they internalize themselves in one’s own behavior and thinking, how we ourselves contribute to our own oppression.

Frank Lopez Gonzalez (2004), the 2004 valedictorian of New York’s El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, said in his graduation address:

We unconsciously carry the burdens of our past. We bear the remnants of years of oppression and the backlash of society as we tried to change the social fabric of this country. These burdens have restricted us for decades, but as we try to push ourselves forward, to cure this disease, we must confront the barriers implanted in our hearts and minds.

This is very much the sense of struggle in Cobb’s essay on organizing Freedom Schools (Chapter 7): “Every step in the fight against racism and discrimination was preceded by a deeper and more profound struggle that involved confronting oneself.” One suspects that the psychological health of movements depends significantly on the degree to which participants can keep the two struggles in balance.

The idea of Freedom Summer was an intensely controversial one among movement veterans before it happened. Some people didn’t want a bunch of outsiders, especially White outsiders, coming down at all. Some didn’t think much of the Freedom School idea and joked about the schools being a place to dump some outsiders where they wouldn’t get in the way. (This emphatically did not include the local people, who took the schools to heart from the very first [Adickes, 2005]). By all accounts, what happened in most schools that summer was transformative, exceeding the expectations of proponents and critics alike (Adickes, 2005; Belfrage, 1965; Howe, 1984; Rothschild, 1982; Sutherland, 1965). Within a few years, some of the people who had



not been particularly high on the idea were running Freedom School–like projects of their own.

In Washington, DC, in 1968, Charlie Cobb and other SNCC members, including Ivanhoe Donaldson, Courtland Cox, and Jennifer Lawson, founded the Drum and Spear Bookstore, as much a library and community center as a bookstore, offering free classes for community youth and adults. In Atlanta, Vincent Harding, a longtime SNCC supporter who had been involved in training volunteers for the Mississippi Summer Project, and Bill Strickland, who headed a branch of SNCC called the Northern Student Movement, were among the central figures in the creation of the Institute of the Black World, which brought together intellectuals from across the African diaspora who shared an interest in using scholarship as a tool of struggle (Ward, 2001). Many members of the SNCC were involved in the national movement to establish Black Studies departments.

It is ironic that charter schools—publicly supported schools freed of many centralized restrictions—are now widely understood as a conservative initiative, if not a conservative plot to undermine public education. Had the same opportunities existed 40 years ago, the Black Panther Party would have dotted the ghetto with liberation schools. Politically left communities are no longer sufficiently well organized to take advantage of the opportunity these schools could represent (although, again, that seems to be changing; see, e.g., Chapter 17.) Contrary to some expectations, Chapter 10 shows that Oakland’s Black Panther school worked very hard to broaden the social experience of its children, to expose them to things that weren’t a part of growing up in inner-city Oakland. This, too, is a recurring theme in the history of liberatory education. According to Bob Moses:

Part of what the Movement did was just expose people to a lot. I mean it was exposing people to all different kinds of people who were coming in and out of Mississippi. Exposing people to people by taking them out of Mississippi, traveling, and meeting people elsewhere. And the people that they’re meeting are all people who are somehow part of this Movement culture. They share in certain values and [are] talking about certain things. (Lawson & Payne, 2006, p. 173)

One can think of a place like the Highlander Center as specializing in giving people kinds of social experiences that are not available in their home communities. (And for many Southerners, the experience of interracial living had as much impact as anything that was actually taught.) Many programs teach pride in one’s origins, no matter how humble or despised, while encouraging students not to be limited by those origins.

Contemporary expressions of education for liberation face all the issues their predecessors have faced in the past, but with some changes, too. After 40 years, nearly all of the curriculum from the Freedom Schools (for the



curriculum, see www.educationanddemocracy.org or the fall 1991 edition of *Radical Teacher*) is still relevant, but there are some things one might want to add. Given the evolution of mass media and the investment of many youth in the media, some would argue for the inclusion of some kind of media literacy component.

The most obvious addition might be some way to think seriously about gender. Buying into a version of the prevailing sex role definitions gives young men and women in the inner city something to be proud of in ways that the broader society reinforces. There is probably no clearer illustration of Marx's point (or Gandhi's, Martin Luther King's, or Charlie Cobb's) about the oppressed supporting the systems that oppress them. Young people are so deeply invested in their gender self-definitions that if we can get them to think analytically about that, it opens them up to thinking critically in general.

Like their predecessors, many contemporary programs struggle to find a balanced way to think about individual responsibility in the context of socially structured oppression. One might make a case that contemporary teacher-organizers are often not as sophisticated as Ella Baker or Septima Clark, who could look unblinkingly at the flaws, the baggage, carried by poor people while seeing with equal clarity the social forces bearing down upon them. Certainly, many progressives fear that admitting the idea of the "responsibility" of the marginalized plays into conservative hands. The difficulty becomes how to acknowledge the reality of negative elements in youth culture, let us say, without reducing youngsters to that.

Race remains an issue for many of those concerned with liberatory education, and it could hardly be otherwise. Can White people "teach freedom"? Given the history through which we have come, does not the mere assumption of the authoritative role of teacher by Whites replicate the traditional White-Black hierarchy? Or, are there ways White people can teach with awareness of and respect for African American traditions and sensibilities? Thinking critically about social issues is a path, and once students start down it, it may not matter very much exactly how they got started. One could read the history of Highlander, which played a key part in the development of many young Black activists, that way (and yet, if Highlander had not added a Black woman to its staff in the 1950s, it is not at all clear that the work in the Sea Islands would have gone as well).

Lawrence Goodwyn (1976) argues that the development of collective self-confidence is one of the prerequisites of mass movements. One of the factors making that difficult for contemporary liberatory education efforts is the dead hand of the 1960s. Comparing ourselves and the people around us to imagined icons of the 1960s merely reinforces our sense of historical inadequacy. In fact, it would be hard to make an empirical case that youth in the 1980s and 1990s were dramatically less idealistic than those of the sacred 1960s.



The difference may be that latter generations did not operate under such favorable structural conditions (such as the Cold War and the decline of cotton agriculture) and did not manage to find vehicles for expressing their politics that were as powerful as some of those that developed in the 1960s. That's different from saying the desire wasn't there. In fact, one of the reasons to have young people study the 1960s is to move them beyond romanticizing it so that they can see themselves as not so different from the people who made history then.

Many in the SNCC understood struggle as inevitably involving the fight to maintain a sense of comradeship and identity with one's colleagues. They once thought of themselves as a band of brothers and sisters, a circle of trust. Many of the SNCC's members give some credit for that to Ella Baker. "The SNCC of which I was a part," says Casey Hayden, "was nurturing, warm, familial, supportive, honest and penetrating, radical and pragmatic. I think of it as womanist. I see Ella in all of that" (Hayden, 2003, p. 101). Joanne Grant's film on Baker, *Fundi*, makes a point of showing her asking participants in a meeting if they had any personal concerns that needed to be addressed before business started.

That element of struggle, maintaining a sense of comradeship, may be particularly difficult for African Americans right now, many of whom are growing up in communities that don't exhibit the level of internal solidarity that once characterized Black communities. In particular, it may be that patterns of interactions among African American youth, especially boys, have in places become unsupportive and mean-spirited, a culture of put-down and insult, masquerading as joking (Payne, 2003; Potts in Chapter 16; see Kelly (2002) for a different interpretation).

In this light, it is striking that many programs explicitly encourage more supportive patterns of interaction. In Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, scholars are asked to "recognize" one another. (In fact, when scholars in those schools refer to the "Freedom School way" it seems to mean, more or less, "be positive.") At least three of the other programs described in this volume—the Benjamin Mays Institute (Chapter 16), Brotherhood Sister Sol (Chapter 11), and Project Daniel (Chapter 13)—have similar traditions. At this historical moment, it may well be that for youth coming out of urban communities, the deliberate teaching of social solidarity becomes particularly important. They need to be encouraged to see what's right in one another.

It is useful to think of two main streams of emancipatory education among Black people. One is the stream consisting of Citizenship schools, Freedom schools, and their successors. The other would be initiatives in the tradition of cultural nationalist or African-centered education, education that "acknowledges Afrikan spirituality as an essential aspect of our uniqueness



as a people and makes it an instrument of our liberation” (Council of Independent Black Institutions, www.cibi.org, retrieved November 27, 2007). The distinction is a little artificial in the sense that many people are involved in both, but it is useful to underscore that the African-centered tradition would probably have existed even in the absence of the civil rights movement. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, rites of passage programs—adapted from African coming-of-age training—were probably the most widely available form of education for liberation in Black communities. Paul Hill Jr., who heads the National Rites of Passage Institute, says that over the years he has received many inquiries

predicated on the assumption that today’s teenagers are without moorings or elders capable of transmitting enduring human values and cultural traditions that reflect our uniqueness as descendants of Africans. . . . [I]f wise elders do not initiate adolescents, won’t adolescents initiate themselves? (2004, p. 31)

Many of the projects in the Freedom School tradition have proven short-lived. African-centered institutions struggle for resources like everyone else, but some of them have demonstrated considerable staying power. The Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), which insists that its member institutions raise most of their funds within the Black community, is 35 years old. Perhaps because the transmission of values is so central to their vision, no matter what else is going on, cultural nationalists will be working with children. Nor do they have an awkwardness in addressing negative peer culture. From their position, Western culture is itself problematic.

The confluence between the resurgence of interest in social justice education and the dominance of hip-hop as the mode of cultural expression for a generation raises some interesting issues about the future of education for liberation. It is clear that the two will feed off each other. Hip-hop has strong elements of social critique built into it, and even some of its most negative elements—the misogyny, individualism, and materialism—can serve as points of entry into important conversations. Some of the people in this history have thought of struggle as threefold: a battle against structures of inequality, a battle to develop oneself and overcome one’s own baggage, and a battle for supportive and principled relationships among comrades. Some hip-hop has certainly demonstrated to speak to the first; we shall have to see how much capacity it has to speak to the latter two.

On the Sea Islands, where Septima Clark began her life’s work, when a respected person passed away, after the internment, custom called for children to step across the grave. The best parts of the spirit of the deceased were understood to pass into the children. As a nation, we have done a terrible job of passing our children over the graves of their ancestors and, given their



already tenuous relationship to the rest of society, that failure often falls with greatest weight on African American and other children of color. That may be the best way to think of what education for liberation does at its best: It is a way to pass children over the graves of their ancestors, to give them a moral grounding in the past that will help them ask their own questions in the present and seek their own answers.

