

Black Power Chronicles: Jennifer Lawson

Jennifer Lawson, born June 8, 1946, in Fairfield, Alabama, discussed her upbringing in segregated Alabama, her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and her work with various organizations. She attended Tuskegee University, where she became active in student activism. Lawson worked with SNCC, the National Council of Negro Women, and founded Magic Box Mediaworks. She highlighted the importance of education, media, and community empowerment. Lawson's work in Lowndes County, Alabama, involved organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and using creative methods like comic books and billboards to educate and mobilize the community. She also emphasized the significance of Pan-Africanism and the influence of figures like CLR James and Walter Rodney on her activism.

Joshua Myers: Hi. My name is Joshua Myers, and today's date is May 17, 2017. This is the Black Power Chronicles interview for Jennifer Lawson.

Jennifer Karen Lawson was born on June 8, 1946, in Fairfield, Alabama. Her father, Willie D. Lawson, was the owner of a repair shop, and her mother, Velma Lawson, was a retired schoolteacher. She is the second of five children: Willie D., Frankie, James, and Skylar.

Lawson She attended Tuskegee University briefly before dropping out and dedicating her time to the Civil Rights Movement. She worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] and the National Council of Negro Women [NCNW], where she focused on self-empowerment programs for rural women. She also worked as deputy director for an adult education program in Mississippi's Quitman County.

Lawson eventually relocated to Washington, DC, where she worked as art director for Drum and Spear, a bookstore and publishing company. In 1970, Lawson moved to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, as coordinator of a joint publishing project, and it was there that she decided to study film.

After earning her MFA from Columbia University in 1974, Lawson worked in programming at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS before founding Magic Box Mediaworks. Thank you, Ms. Lawson, for joining us today.

Jennifer Lawson: It's a pleasure to be here with you, Josh.

Joshua Myers: The first question we want to consider here for Black Power Chronicles is to really speak to your background. What was it like growing up in Alabama in the 1950s and the 1960s and how did that prepare the ground for what you would become later in life?

Jennifer Lawson: Fairfield, Alabama, a suburb of Birmingham, was an almost untenable place in many ways for People of Color. For African-Americans, you were relegated to communities that were impoverished for the most part, and segregation was the rule of the land.

[George Wallace](#) was the governor of Alabama for a good portion of that time, and there are many video clips of him saying, "Segregation now, segregation forever." You had white citizens' councils and other organizations that worked alongside the police—particularly the infamous police chief, Bull Connor—to ensure that Black people were repressed.¹ It was a very, very repressive atmosphere.

One of the things that shaped me in many ways was the response of the African-American community. It is very heartening for me to know that in those circumstances—in the worst of circumstances—you often see the best of people.

For middle-class African-Americans and even the wealthiest African-Americans, like A.G. Gaston, who was a millionaire living in Birmingham, we were all one in many ways.² We were quite united. A.G. Gaston and his family would mingle and meet with people who just had been sharecroppers and were now mine workers, some on the verge of homelessness. So, you had this real mixture of classes, a mixture of people from various educational groups.

One of the things that united us was our desire to stand tall and to thrive as much as possible in the face of all that repression.

Joshua Myers: The institutional life in the Black community, churches, civic organizations, what was its role, even before we get to the quote, unquote “movement,” in helping develop your community?

Jennifer Lawson: You had men and women who owned their own businesses. My father had his own business, and many others were entrepreneurs. So we had our own little parallel universe.

¹ White Citizens' Councils were segregationist organizations that emerged in the 1950s to resist civil rights efforts through economic pressure and political influence. In Birmingham, Alabama, police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor became infamous for using brutal tactics, including police dogs and fire hoses, to suppress Black activists during the civil rights movement. His coordination with white supremacist groups reinforced systemic racial oppression.

² A.G. Gaston (1892–1996) was a prominent African American entrepreneur, businessman, and philanthropist in Birmingham, Alabama. He built a business empire spanning banking, insurance, and funeral services, amassing significant wealth despite the constraints of segregation.

I grew up, in many ways, in a bubble where we had Black doctors, Black dentists, Black pharmacists, Black ministers. We had Black newspapers. It was a world that sought to nurture you and protect you from the very, very threatening world right outside your door.

It varied. There were some ministers who were very supportive. There were movement activities, [and some ministers] allowed their churches to be meeting places. But there were others whose notion of being protective was to stay out of it. [Their belief was] “Let’s trust in the Lord and stay out of this. The Lord will provide a way, so let’s stay out of this and assume this is just the way things are meant to be.”

As you might tell, I gravitated toward those who felt that we should provide the solutions.

Joshua Myers: That’s a part of Black Power in some ways—this attempt to create a safe space or an institutional foundation for the Black community in the midst of everything happening external to our communities. It’s this kind of autonomy that you begin to see.

Jennifer Lawson: I didn’t think of it that way as a child growing up in those circumstances. Of course, I didn’t think of it as Black Power, nor did I think of it as autonomy. But I must say, it gave me an incredible amount of confidence in our ability to govern, our ability to do things, our ability as people of color.

For me, the sky was the limit. But I also felt that there was this repressive circumstance that we were living in and it wasn’t, to me, a situation that was ordained to be. I did feel, even as a child, that we didn’t have to live under those conditions. I think that was partly due to my family. Even though we were poor, we traveled.

As a child, my father would go on road trips in our old, used car. We’d go to Canada, to New York City. I went to all of the Smithsonian museums and many others as a small child. We’d go to California, and on our way to and from California, we’d go into Mexico. So, I had a sense of a broader world.

We were encouraged to read, and books became a window into a much larger world. For me and my siblings, that was something that we were exposed to. I gravitated toward friends in school, particularly in high school, who shared that same vision of a larger world.

Joshua Myers: Absolutely critical in terms of how we understand the impetus to want to change the local conditions by having a sense of how things existed beyond that. I’m really curious to know some of your favorite books during that period.

Jennifer Lawson: It’s really interesting. I remember at some point getting a hold of [Upton Sinclair’s](#) *The Jungle*.

Birmingham is an interesting place because it was a coal-mining, industrial city. It's very industrial, and now it's one of those forsaken places—you know, it's the Rust Belt in many ways, even though it's trying to reinvent itself.³

I grew up in a circumstance where my father took me to some of the union meetings when people were declaring strikes. So, I knew who [John L. Lewis](#) was, a union leader. I understood the principles of strikes and scabs. I saw company towns where people lived in near-slavery conditions.

My father would repair things for people and often did it on a barter basis because they didn't get cash. They got scrip from the company—money that could only be spent at the company store, not out in the real world.⁴

Joshua Myers: Pratt City [AL].

Jennifer Lawson: Yes, Pratt City. Powderly [AL] was another one. Brighton [AL] and Near Bessemer [AL]. Those places were particularly like that. It was an interesting landscape to come of age in.

Upton Sinclair [The Jungle] became one of the books. Then there was [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky—*Crime and Punishment* and some of his other works, which I found quite interesting. At one point, *The Fountainhead* and some of those other books also came my way.

You might find it interesting that in Birmingham, I would go from Fairfield to downtown Birmingham with some regularity to take music lessons. You take the segregated bus to Birmingham and I take music lessons. There was this one part of Birmingham that was a little bastion of liberalism, in a way.

There was a bookstore—Crutcher's Bookstore. The owner had books and magazines that went beyond the Bible and two other versions of the life of Jesus that many other bookstores had, or or *Redbook* magazine.

It was a place where I would go to buy books, and sometimes the owner would recommend books to me as well. It was a fascinating little exchange that took place there.

I don't know what he thought of this Black kid coming from Fairfield to his bookstore and buying these books, but I remember becoming quite addicted to Paul Krassner's *The Realist*. It

³ Rust Belt is a region in the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, historically known for its industrial and manufacturing economy, which declined due to deindustrialization, leading to economic hardship and population loss.

⁴ Scrip is a form of currency issued by employers, particularly in mining and industrial towns, that could only be used at company-owned stores, often trapping workers in a cycle of debt and dependency.

was a magazine of that time—sort of like Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart [of its era], but in print form.

It was satire—[Lenny Bruce](#) and others were associated with it—but it had that level of political satire. It was the best thing. I couldn't wait until a new issue came out.

Joshua Myers: You mentioned unions and labor. To what extent was that activism interracial? As a follow-up to that, do you have any recollection or personal memories of the Communist Party USA? Because of the influence of the Scottsboro Boys and how the Party was able to come into Alabama during that period, many African-Americans joined the Communist Party as a result.⁵

Jennifer Lawson: And I later learned that. But as a child, growing up in those circumstances, it wasn't something that I was aware of in that way. I had a childhood friend who became very active later with a socialist group. I don't think it was the Communist Party. I know people who actually joined the Communist Party, but in Birmingham, I didn't know anyone who was an active Communist Party member or who even mentioned it.

Things were so repressive, though. We're talking about a time when the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel] were executed and when the whole Red Scare was happening. There were billboards in Alabama on main roads that said Martin Luther King Jr. is a communist. And so communism then was a real dirty word in that sense.

Joshua Myers: And the unions...was it interracial or?

Jennifer Lawson: The unions that I knew of, the meetings that I went to with my father, were not interracial. To my knowledge, I never saw white people in them, and I never saw them having a relationship. The adults in my world, to my knowledge, did not have relationships with white people, aside from the awful ones where it was, "Hey boy, what you doing here?" kind of horror stories.

Joshua Myers: Let's move on to your college years. So, you went to Tuskegee. What was the environment like there? Because we know about how the Tuskegee Machine came about, and we hear about that era—the late 19th century, early 20th century.⁶ But we never hear much about

⁵ The Scottsboro Boys case (1931) involved nine Black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama. The case gained national attention, and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), through its legal arm, the International Labor Defense (ILD), provided legal assistance and international advocacy.

⁶ Tuskegee University, founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, became a leading institution for Black education, emphasizing vocational training, self-reliance, and economic empowerment. The "Tuskegee Machine" refers to Washington's powerful

student life and the dynamics on campus by the mid-20th century. So let's start there and get a sense of how being on campus shaped you.

Jennifer Lawson: One of the books that was really important to me was [Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*](#). When I was at Tuskegee, I felt that this was the place the book was about.

First of all, the campus—let's talk about campus life. It's really important to understand...when I was there, I went to Tuskegee in the fall of 1963, in late August or early September. The March on Washington had just taken place, and we were in a time when civil rights activity was beginning to bubble up. Martin Luther King and the organizations...that's really well known. People are meeting each at Tuskegee as students for the first time that fall.

I was surprised at how little the majority of students there cared about civil rights, reading *The New York Times*, or trying to find out what was happening in the larger world. It was a place where I was struck by people who would say, "Oh, I'm here to marry a doctor. I want to marry someone who's going to be a doctor, a dentist, or a lawyer."

And then there was skin color—the conversations around it. There were these appalling discussions that helped me understand the broader world I was being exposed to, a world with a range of Black people and the kinds of prejudices they held. African and West Indian students were being called very derogatory terms. People would say, "Oh, you're not going to sit next to her, are you? She's from Africa. You know, they don't use deodorant," or things like that.

With that, I began to be a rebel in many ways, in the face of the insularity and xenophobia my fellow students were showing. That was one of the things about student life. I was rejecting traditional student life. There were many people who, Tuskegee was nirvana for them. They were in heaven. They loved being in the AKAs, the Deltas, the Omegas—all the Greek life happening on campus. It was a rich world for them. The football games, the Commodores with Lionel Richie were right on campus at the little juke joints. It was a new bubble, in that way.

I kept breaking out of the bubble, though, because I knew that right outside the campus gates, you couldn't go to some of the stores in downtown Tuskegee. There were incredibly wealthy people and many professionals who lived in Tuskegee proper because they worked at the VA hospital. This was connected to Tuskegee as a base for the famed Tuskegee Airmen. So, Tuskegee had a sizable middle class and a well-educated community, but the students had narrowed into typical student life.

The isolation would break—that the bubble would burst—when President [John F.] Kennedy was assassinated. That was something that did come into that world. That was now the news of the

network of political and financial influence, which he used to secure funding for Black education while maintaining a conciliatory approach to racial issues

world coming into our little space. But after the wave of the shock that went through the campus, people were ready to go back to the usual campus life.

I met other students who shared my thinking about being aware and active about the contradictions taking place—both on campus and in the community around it. We then had a student group. Dr. Gwendolyn Patton, who recently passed away, was one of the activists. And there was also George Ware, or as he called himself, George Washington Ware, who later ended up working with the Funkadelics. Simuel Schultz and Wendy Parrish, we became a small core of student activists. On weekends and after school, we would go out to demonstrate and integrate some of the businesses off campus. We also began to look at the politics of Macon County. Tuskegee is located in Macon County and we began to look at the politics of the county.

At that time, I met an older retired professor, Dr. [Charles Goode] Gomillion. He had done work on gerrymandering and explained to me what it was. I was appalled to find out that while people had the right to vote, their votes were being canceled out by the way districts were redrawn to eliminate the power of the Black vote.⁷

Those things cracked my mind up on some of the politics of the place. Michael Lomax, who now heads the United Negro College Fund, had a mother who ran a newspaper out of Tuskegee. She was in Los Angeles, but she ran a newspaper [in Tuskegee] that talked about the problems in Macon County and Tuskegee. Those are things that heightened my awareness.

Joshua Myers: It's interesting that you made the connection between the students and their class attitudes, which created a different dynamic than what you experienced growing up in Birmingham. You talked about how race collapsed the class differences in Birmingham. And yet at Tuskegee, you saw people making different kinds of decisions and choices about life based on their class situation. Where were the students coming from? All across the country?

Jennifer Lawson: All across the country. All across the world. You had people who were coming from African countries. I met a student, a woman that I saw when I was living in East Africa, who had come from Uganda. She studied and later became a medical doctor in Uganda. You had people from the West Indies and from different parts of Africa.

Joshua Myers: What were their attitudes toward Jim Crow?

⁷ Gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral district boundaries to favor a particular political party or group. A key tactic used to weaken Black political power has been racial gerrymandering, where districts are drawn to dilute the influence of Black voters—either by "packing" them into a few districts to limit their overall representation or "cracking" them across multiple districts to minimize their electoral impact.

Jennifer Lawson: They were appalled, but they were also under circumstances where they sort of felt that they needed to just plow through, get out of school, get through their education and go home. So they weren't there to start a fight of any kind.

Joshua Myers: How did you come to SNCC?

Jennifer Lawson: I came to SNCC through Gwen Patton, George Ware, George Davis. All of us were doing our student activities and continued for several years. We move up to a point where we're in mid-1964 and 1965. In 1964, you had Freedom Summer and I was working in New York. In [19]63 - [19]64 I had a fabulous paid internship at Sloan Kettering Memorial Institute for Cancer Research. At the time, I thought I wanted to be a doctor, so it was an incredible opportunity for me. But it also meant that I didn't participate in the March on Washington because I was in New York for my internship, and I also didn't participate in Freedom Summer.

When I was back at Tuskegee in the fall of 1964, it was right after the bodies of the three civil rights workers had been found.⁸ SNCC and other groups, including COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], were asking for student volunteers to go to Mississippi to work on the election and work on the campaign of getting out the vote. I think this was for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket. Since I had missed Freedom Summer, I would go. Most people were reluctant to even consider it. They thought, "Oh, God, Mississippi? They had just killed three people, and while they were looking for their bodies, they found other bodies." People had this notion that Mississippi was this horrendous place.

But I thought, "How could I kid myself?" I lived in Alabama. Mississippi was right next door—there was no real border, you just drove straight into it. I had been there before, and I wasn't afraid of Mississippi.

I couldn't claim to be afraid of Mississippi while living in Alabama—it was the same kind of place. I volunteered to go over. I worked for two weeks in Jackson, Mississippi, canvassing for voters for that campaign and came back. I met some SNCC people, and it gave me a sense of what organizing in a rural area was like and what canvassing meant.

The next year, in 1965, a larger group of us at Tuskegee became very active when Martin Luther King and others were in the area for the Selma [AL] to Montgomery [AL] marches. During that time, I was arrested along with a group of students. [James Forman](#) wrote extensively about this in his book on [Sammy Younge Jr.](#), my classmate and fellow activist, who was later killed.⁹

⁸ In the summer of 1964, during Freedom Summer, three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Their bodies were discovered on August 4, 1964, after weeks of national attention and an extensive FBI investigation.

⁹ James Forman, a key leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), wrote extensively about Sammy Younge Jr. in his 1972 book, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. Sammy Younge Jr. was a Tuskegee University student and civil rights activist who was murdered on January 3, 1966, for using a whites-only restroom in Alabama.

Before Sammy's death, a number of us had participated in demonstrations in Montgomery and joined marches in support of what King and others were doing with the Selma to Montgomery march. They were coming from Selma. We came from Tuskegee and were marching around the state capitol there. At that time, I was arrested and spent a week in jail. In all of those interactions that I was having with SNCC people...it was interesting. There was a point at which there was some division among us college students about SNCC and Jim Forman and [William "Winky" Hall](#) and other SNCC activists saying, "Oh, why don't you join SNCC?" And we were saying "Well, we have our own student group here."

It was something we had to really think about as to whether we would continue with our studies in school and continue as student activists through our student group or work with SNCC. And I ultimately decided that I would leave school and work with SNCC full time.

Joshua Myers: Was that because of the conversations that you had within your student group. Was it because of the people that you met that were recruiting to SNCC? Explain your thought process.

Jennifer Lawson: My thought process at the time...I felt very torn, dividing myself between two worlds. It was an unsustainable situation that I was trying to be a student. I had been a good student and now I was not being as good a student as possible because I was being so active with the movement.

But then there were times when there were things that I needed to do with the movement that I couldn't participate in because I had a final. These two worlds were pulling at me. For me it was the notion of...you're talking about becoming a doctor? Why did you want to become a doctor? I thought, well I want to help my people. Being a doctor I could do things that would provide healing and services to people.

Then I realized that while that might affect a small number of people—the people who would be my patients—if I could do whatever I could to help change the awful circumstances of segregation, the awful circumstances of not being of the majority of people, not being able to vote and living second class lives, that would affect a larger number of people.

I thought that it was much more important to become an activist, because there were so few people who were willing to go that route while there would be an ample supply in the world of doctors and lawyers and other professionals. I thought that's the route that I will take.

It was a big decision for me, because, as I mentioned, I came from a poor family, and I had to pay my own way through college, through both undergraduate and graduate school. I had the good fortune to get a full scholarship. In making the decision to leave Tuskegee, I was relinquishing that. There was no clear route to, how do you return and how do you...

Joshua Myers: How was that conversation with your family, your parents?

Jennifer Lawson: My mother had passed away some years earlier, and it was just my father. My father had this kind of iconoclastic [idea] of...a very different perspective on it. He said much earlier, “Hey, you're on your own. If you want to eat, you work.”

From the time I was 12 years old, I had been working. It was much more a decision that I felt I had to make for myself. It wasn't as though I felt that I had parents who were going to help me in life or be there for me in that way. It was much more, “I'm out here on my own.” This is a decision that I need to think carefully about, because it's going to be my decision.

Joshua Myers: What were the conversations like among SNCC activists, particularly while canvassing in Mississippi in the wake of what happened in Atlantic City? How did those experiences...did they begin to challenge your beliefs in normative American democracy—the contradictions of organizing people, even at the highest levels within the Democratic Party, and realizing that it wasn't enough? There needs to be something more?

Jennifer Lawson: Discussions of that nature didn't take place as much in Mississippi because in Mississippi we were engaged in the logistics of the day. How many people did you talk to today? What areas did you cover? It was more logistics as opposed to a larger philosophical discussion.

The people that I met through SNCC, when I actually left and started working in SNCC—now we're talking about 1965, 1966—[Courtland Cox](#), [Charlie Cobb](#), [Cleveland Sellers](#), [Judy Richardson](#), [Cynthia Washington](#), [Ruth Howard Chambers](#), [Karen Spellman](#). The list goes on. It was conversations with those individuals where we would talk about what we are doing and why we are doing it. We understood the importance of the vote. It was the old discussions that were had and made public with others where it was like, “Ok. Enough of the lunch counter business. What will it profit you to integrate a lunch counter if you don't have the money to buy a sandwich?” How do you get to a place where you can have better resources?

For all the problems People of Color—particularly African-Americans—had, it seemed as if, when we look and we connect the dots to say, in order to solve this you just don't want to be out here complaining about what the police did to you or what the sheriff did to you.

It's much bigger that, if you are in the majority, why not vote and become the sheriff? Why not have your neighbor as the sheriff and then hold him or her accountable? Why not have people that you know and people that you feel you can definitely talk back to in those positions, particularly if you're in the majority. For the Black Belt counties of Alabama, that was very definitely the case. You had African-Americans who were in the majority. That was something that made me feel that we had a clear path [forward]. The logic of it seemed impeccable to me.

[Jack Minnis](#), the lead researcher at SNCC in Atlanta [GA], had done an analysis of the Black Belt counties and realized that you could run for office without going through the traditional structures of the Democratic and Republican parties. You could have independent organizations.

SNCC was beginning to develop a project around the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and I worked on that with Courtland Cox, [Ralph Featherstone](#), and a number of other people.

Joshua Myers: You've outlined the assumptions behind it. What did it look like in practice to be able to develop and craft independent Black politics during this time?

Jennifer Lawson: In practice, it looked like the usual hard work of doing anything which requires a lot of time, commitment, and perseverance. It meant knocking on doors, talking to sharecroppers, meetings at night, meetings on weekends with people.

And we're talking pre-cell phones, pre-fax machines. We're talking about running things off on the mimeograph machines—see, I still have that motion there—but running things off on mimeograph machines to make copies to give to people. Then I also realized the high rate of illiteracy. Even when we were doing these flyers, you didn't have a lot of people who could read and write. That's how bad the education system in a lot of these places were.

We started talking about, "How do we communicate more effectively?" To that end, I had been something of an amateur artist and would draw things. So, I started drawing little cartoons—comic book-like drawings—to talk about what the role of the sheriff would be. It was like a version of a PowerPoint. But we would use these as tools in our organizing work. I made these little comic books one step above stick figures, but they were helpful in being something we could have people focus on and get ideas across.

That also led to my work in Lowndes County, when we were getting towards the election and we wanted to communicate to people all over the county and wanted to try to avoid any violence. We were concerned about their safety that we then said, "It would be great if we could have billboards." I said, if somebody could get me the lumber, I could make billboards. I painted three or four billboards that we posted around Lowndes County on land that was owned by Black landowners that had said, "Vote for the Black Panther and go home." And the Black Panther was the symbol of the [Lowndes County Freedom Organization](#), and that was the original, so to speak, Black Panther Party.

Joshua Myers: Why the Black Panther?

Jennifer Lawson: First, let's back up and recognize that because of this problem with illiteracy that you had for both Blacks and whites in Alabama at that time, symbols for [political] parties

were incredibly important. People would often just look for their party symbol when they went in to vote. The symbol was quite important.

In Lowndes County, the Democratic Party there, had as a symbol a white rooster. John Hewlett, who was the head of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and a local person there said, “Boy, it’d be great if we had a mean Black cat to run that old white rooster out of this county.” I’m paraphrasing, but that was the idea.

We began to look for an image and people in Lowndes County asked the SNCC office in Atlanta if they could send something. Ruth Howard Chambers sent the symbol down that I would hand draw and copy many, many times. That symbol, though, was really the Clark College football mascot from Clark [University] in Atlanta.

Joshua Myers: Were you involved with the attempts to export this idea across the country?

Jennifer Lawson: No, I wasn’t. I was very focused on our work in Lowndes County. There were people who came from other places—from Philadelphia and activists from other places—because they were in awe of what was taking place in Lowndes County. But I wasn’t actively going to other places to spread the idea.

I participated, with many of our colleagues, and we continued to try to refine our thinking and to look at our wins and losses. And to think about, what does it mean and how can one be effective? That was something that led me after Lowndes County.

I left Lowndes County and began to work at one point with the National Council for Negro Women. I kept feeling that if we thought we had it bad as Black people, that the people who were in even worse circumstances were Black women. I had seen so many instances of domestic abuse or domestic bullying, or just women who were so incredibly smart, who were not sort of being able to live to their full potential.

I thought that here was an opportunity to work with rural women and with women in some of the poorest places in the country to help them. The National Council of Negro Women at that time had an economic development project for women in Mississippi, and had come about because there had been a number of stories about how there was hunger in America, and how Mississippi was in such terrible shape.

There were actually people who showed signs like you would have in a third-world country, particularly children of starvation. There was this whole notion of sending food aid. But then the National Council of Negro Women had thought, “What if we can provide ways for people to be more entrepreneurial as well as to provide food?”

I then worked on a project like that, and I had the honor of working very closely with Fannie Lou and with another incredible woman, Unita Blackwell, who became the mayor of Myersville, Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer was in Ruleville, Mississippi. So, these were my days of driving all over the state of Mississippi to manage these projects that we had going there.

Joshua Myers: Did you leave SNCC to work there?

Jennifer Lawson: I left SNCC to work there. I left SNCC in part too, because I felt we weren't clear about where we were heading at that point. SNCC had always been an organization in transition and in change. There are waves of it. SNCC, for me, is like a river, and your SNCC depends on when you stepped into the river.

Some people stepped in when the current was cold. Others stepped in when it was warm, and some when it was flowing very full. But that's how it was to me. I came in at a point when Marion Barry and John Lewis were still a part of SNCC. By the time I was truly a part of SNCC, they were no longer in SNCC.

I was in a part where there was a whole group of people with whom I feel very, very close to this day, and feel that it's a lifetime of closeness. We'll always be, as they say, a band of brothers and sisters in that respect. The next wave were people like [H.] Rap Brown.

Joshua Myers: And the whole Atlanta declaration.

Jennifer Lawson: Some of the people from Atlanta, they had come in the same time I had. Like [Gwendolyn] Zoharah Simmons and others. I thought that it wasn't quite clear where we were going. At that point, I felt that it was time to move on. This was also at a time when Stokely [Carmichael] had been the chairperson of SNCC.

It was prior to Stokely's ascendancy, after Willie Ricks made the call for Black Power, you're with the Meredith March Against Fear. After that, Stokely was changing too. Because one of the things that we had been, is a true organization in many ways, where the people who appeared on television—Julian Bond or Stokely or John Lewis—they were the spokesperson for the organization.

But the thought and everything was more collectively of the organization. But now we had come to a point where the cameras were sort of saying, “Stokely, we want to hear what you think.” So, it was now about individual leadership and charismatic leadership and about the individual, not about the group. So it didn't matter where SNCC was on a particular issue, it's, “Where is Stokely on this?”

Joshua Myers: So, you said that altered the kind of internal politics of the organization.

Jennifer Lawson: Exactly. I felt that it's very difficult in that circumstance to have a coherent organization, when you have a person who speaks for the organization and the organization either has to follow in lockstep or be in contradiction with whatever the leader has said.

So, it's no longer a spokesperson and there's no longer that possibility, for me, of having this coherent thought and something that I go, "Okay, I understand the logic of what we are doing." I felt that it was time for me to move on and that's when I looked for the logic of what I believed in, and went and worked with the National Council of Negro Women.

Joshua Myers: So, this is by 1966, [19]67.

Jennifer Lawson: This is around 1967, [19]68. Then around that time, I continued as I said that it's a lifetime of closeness to my SNCC colleagues. With Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Ralph Featherstone—we are all still really in communication with each other.

By then, I was running an adult education program...literacy and the importance to me of education in Quitman County. Quitman County had been declared the poorest county in Mississippi. So, I was working there, and Courtland and Charlie began to talk about the notion of a publishing company, a bookstore, and of doing these things in Washington, DC.

Also, the Sixth Pan-African Congress. I then went to Algiers, Algeria in [19]69 I believe it was, to attend a Pan-African festival of the arts. There were a number of people from many organizations, [including] Haki Madhubuti and a number of people attended that event.

Joshua Myers: That's the one where [Eldridge] Cleaver had— they basically gave him embassy status.¹⁰

Jennifer Lawson: I went over and attended that event and, at that time, began to feel that, yes, wouldn't it be wonderful if there was greater unity in terms of Africa. And that we should not see ourselves as separate from the Caribbean or from the African world. The African diaspora—the problems that we experienced in the United States—were very akin to problems that people of African descent were experiencing elsewhere. Whether it was Brazil, Colombia or all over Africa.

¹⁰ During the festival, **Eldridge Cleaver**, then the exiled Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, was granted **de facto embassy status** by Algeria's revolutionary government.

This was at a time when Nelson Mandela is still in prison, when South Africa was suffering under apartheid, and when you had Mozambique fighting for its independence. It was a lot of a lot of things happening in the world at that time, and I felt that, yes, it would be really important, and this would be useful and meaningful work as well.

I moved to Washington in the late [19]60s, to work with Drum and Spear Press and Drum and Spear Publishing. We had our holding company, it was Afro-American Resources Inc., and we had the bookstore, [and] the publishing company. We worked with Kojo Nnamdi and others to do radio programs [including with] a woman, Mildred [Mimi] Hayes.

We did a children's program, *Saa Ya Watoto*, the Children's Hour, and we also did a news program. For the children's program, we'd get together and enact these little folk tales and dramas. It was a very meaningful experience, and Washington was abuzz with lots of activity in other groups at that time.

Joshua Myers: Would you see, as Stokely did, Pan-Africanism as an extension of Black Power?

Jennifer Lawson: Very, definitely. Yes.

Joshua Myers: What about African liberation struggles that were going [on] during that particular time, resonated most with not only the Black activists in the diaspora, but average Black people?

Why did those struggles inspire this sort of energy? I'm thinking about ALD [African Liberation Day] and by 1972 there's tens of thousands of people in DC and all across the world energized by this. What was it about what was happening that made this happen?

Jennifer Lawson: I think that there were the voices of leadership that you had within the African-American community that brought attention to those issues. And I think the logic that people saw, there was a kind of hopefulness and a joy of possibilities of the African world.

You also had things like—I forgot when it came out—but you had things like Alex Haley's *Roots* as part of the social fabric that people wanted. And people began to think of, “Yes, who am I? What is my identity?” We had been so very ashamed of, not only slavery, but even southern roots that we didn't want to identify with.

But suddenly, with these cultural phenomena, there was Gil Scott-Heron [and] other people. There was the way of seeing ourselves in a much better light—Harry Belafonte, Miriam Makeba. It was this notion that Africa became something that wasn't then, this notion of this horrible place

where, when I went to Tuskegee, you called the students names. But now instead, it became this possible connection where there could be this sense of pride. I think that was a large part of this interest, and it was a hopefulness and an aspiration that we could, as People of Color beyond national borders, connect and then embrace each other and have a much more positive outlook.

Joshua Myers: I think we have time for one more long question, and it's one that's really close to me, because it involves someone that I continue to look up to: C.L.R. James, and him being in DC, and how he influenced Drum and Spear and the Center for Black Education. It's interesting to me, because if you take a—I would say a normative—history of civil rights and Black Power, it's almost over by the early 1970s.

I'm looking at this as someone who's inspired by James and others and saying that's the time where it really got—at least ideologically and conceptually in terms of the activism of the Sixth Pan-African Congress, FESTAC [Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture]—that's for me in a very vibrant time, as opposed to a time of decline. And DC is right at the center of this.

What's your perspective of that period? And how did James' thinking—and let's not forget [indistinct] and others who were so influential in helping us tease through the question of capitalism, through the question of racism and imperialism, and how that shaped what becomes of these different organizations by the time you get to the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Jennifer Lawson: I felt very, very honored to have known C.L.R. James. I think that I met him first in Havana. In 1966, SNCC had received an invitation to send, sort of a delegation of people, and they wanted someone in the arts to go to Havana. I was asked to go. It was a World Congress of artists in Havana. I attended, and then spent time there with C.L.R., and I have some old sketches that I had made of him from back then.

I met John [Anthony] La Rose and some other people from the UK who knew him and revered him. I also got a sense of C.L.R. in the world. Then when I moved here [DC], C.L.R. was very much a real part of our world, of the Center for Black Education and Drum and Spear, in our activities.

His book, *A History of Pan-African Revolt* was one of the first publications of Drum and Spear Press. It was absolutely terrific, and what he offered was that Pan-African perspective. It was this sort of sense from a wonderful, generous, mentoring elder—of encouraging us to see this broader world and encouraging us to see it in a political light.

Through him, I also then met people like Walter Rodney. And Walter Rodney's book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was yet another important part of that. It was really great to be a part of this world of scholars—that were scholar activists, in many ways too—who then enriched that world.

Joshua Myers: So, study becomes another theme in your life during that period.

Jennifer Lawson: Education remains absolutely critical. I think that education is absolutely essential to liberation, to freedom. Education and good communication. That was one of the reasons that I felt that learning media and trying to keep abreast of the changing media [was] absolutely essential...being able to communicate. It's one thing to know something, but it's meaningless if you don't communicate it to others.

Joshua Myers: One final question. How did being in SNCC, National Council of Negro Women and later on, Drum and Spear—how did that inform your career as a producer in television and other kinds of production and media? Did you see it as an extension, and if so, how?

Jennifer Lawson: My experiences in the Civil Rights Movement were invaluable, and they helped me become a manager, and I'd like to think, a better manager because of that. Part of it was that you learned focus. You had to, as they say, keep your eyes on the prize. You had to know, why are you here and what are you doing? And with that, to then define priorities and stay focused on getting something done. Talk is meaningless. It's what you can accomplish. I became quite focused on that.

I was very fortunate in working in public broadcasting, because public broadcasting shares that objective of media, not just for entertainment. It's great if it's entertaining, but media that also helps to inform people, helps to educate people, helps to give people a sense of the bigger world.

That was a value that I shared that came from and was nurtured through my SNCC and civil rights experience that was shared within the public broadcasting community. I was very fortunate to be a part of that world for my professional career.

Joshua Myers: Thank you so much for helping us with this process.

Jennifer Lawson: Thank you for inviting me to sit down for this interview. I really appreciate it and appreciate your questions.

Joshua Myers: You're welcome. Thank you.