



[Donation Requested]

Women & Men in the Freedom Movement

A Discussion, June, August, & September, 2004

Excerpted from the Civil Rights Movement Veterans Website
www.crmvet.org

Participants:

Chude Allen
Cathy Cade
Hardy Frye
Miriam Glickman

Bruce Hartford
Don Jelinek
Mike Miller
Wazir Peacock

Judy Richardson
Jimmy Rogers
Jean Wiley

Contents:

Introduction
Women in Leadership
Women in SNCC – Early Years
Freedom Summer – 1964
The Women of SNCC
Rita Walker
Rita & the Sheriff
Rita and Her Kids

Economics of Activism
Rita and SNCC
The Women of Mississippi
Women Were Home
Differences in Danger
Sexual Contradictions
Women – Black & White
Sex, Youth, and Stereotypes

Community Standards
“Going Through Changes”
Sex in Black & White
Sex and Civil Rights Workers
Women of SCLC and CORE
The Movement Was Our Life

Introduction

This discussion took place over several sessions and ventured into unexpected areas. Chude had been invited to speak on this topic at a panel held during the 40th anniversary celebration of Freedom Summer in September 2004...so she asked the group to explore some of the nuances and contradictions we'd experienced in the Southern Struggle.

Several issues became apparent early on. First, the subject itself could not be confined to volunteers and staff of the various civil rights organizations; it had to include local women — and men as well. Related to that was the question and nature of leadership: who gets to decide, and based on what? Women and girls often outnumbered men and boys in the freedom schools, at the mass meetings, in the picket lines, and even in the voter registration lines. More than visible in their numbers, they were the backbone of the movement.

Second was the black/white issue: As we talked, we quickly saw that gender and race had greatly influenced both the experiences and the perspectives of the “freedom fighters.” How could it be otherwise in this society in the early and mid 1960s? We were eagerly and energetically breaking taboos, with all the gusto and arrogance of the young. Some of our experiences were hilarious, others wrenching. As always, we invite all veterans to share theirs.

Chude: Jean asked me to think about some questions or a way to focus this discussion of women in the Movement, so I did this meditation that I sometimes do where I say to myself, *"If you could have anything you want, anything in the world, what would it be?"* And then I see what comes up. And what came up first for me was that we be honest. And I thought that was a really interesting thing — not that people would have been dishonest — but sometimes people don't say things.

So then the question was, what did I really want? And so then I started thinking about how if we focus on women — since I'm going to be going and being part of the "Women in the Movement" Panel — we need to talk about white women and Black women, because that was the way that we thought back then. (Though people like Betita keep reminding us that there were Latinas [too].)

So that made me realize that seldom in our group have we really talked about white and Black. The way we operated back then, there were Black men, white men, Black women, and white women. Now I think some of you who are Jewish must have had that sense of yourselves as being white Jewish, if you had a strong Jewish identity?

Miriam: I was surprised to find out years later how many of the white people in the Movement were Jewish.

Bruce: I did [have a Jewish identity].

Chude: Yes, I remember that's one of the reasons when you talked about why you went.

So I thought that what I wanted [for this discussion] was people to think about the things that were contradictions, that really forced us up against whatever. [For example,] for Black activists in the South in the mid-'60s, hair would start to be an issue, right? That would be a contradiction, because some of the activists were beginning to start to wear naturals, but the community is still very uptight about hair. So it's a contradiction, and it's one of those things that — It's very personal, but it also gets into the whole question of how you carried yourself as a man or a woman in a community if you're beginning to do things against the community [customs].

What I realized is that [often] when people talk about women in the Movement now, people are going *"Rah, rah women! Rah, rah women. There was this strong woman! There was this strong woman! We're great! We've been forgotten in history! Remember us! And remember this woman and this woman."* The Tributes to Women of the Freedom Movement are actually quite touching on the web site.

But they don't go into the contradictions. So the last thing I want, which I think is the one that I want the most, is that I would like to hear [about] the contradictions, the dilemmas and the problems around white women, because that's who I'm representing on this [upcoming] panel.

Women in Leadership

Chude: At the end of the last meeting, Miriam voiced a contradiction when she said that *"Whenever you looked at the question of who was the leadership in the community it was the women. But when you looked at the leadership in SNCC it was the men."* A contradiction.

Don: Well, to paraphrase, when you look at who actually was leading it was the women, and who had the title it was the men. When I was new in the south I thought that women were basically in charge of the Movement. That was the impression that I had, everywhere I went. There seemed to be a woman that was in charge.



Ella Baker, SNCC, NAACP, SCLC

Miriam: It looked to me like in the local community it was strong women that were in charge, but among the civil rights workers in all the projects I was on, it was male civil rights workers in charge.

Hardy: It was like that.

Bruce: I think that in addition to differences between community people and civil rights workers, it depends on what we mean by “leadership.” And on “leadership” as opposed to doing the work and participating in the activities. In most places I was, the community women did most of the actual Movement work, and were the majority of participation in mass meetings, demonstrations, and so on. You can see that in the pictures.



Ruth Tinsely, NAACP
under arrest in VA.

But local community men — mainly preachers or occasionally a professional or business owner — not only had the leadership title, but actually led in the sense of making the strategic and tactical decisions and the motivating and inspiring speeches in the mass meetings. And if there were negotiations with the white power structure, it was almost always the local men who did that. Now maybe there was a difference on that between SCLC and SNCC projects, I don't know. But in SCLC and the communities we worked in, no one questioned that structure.

Don: On a wild aside, on Alcatraz Island [during the seizure of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay by Indians in the late 1960s], with the Native Americans the women ran the entire show. [One time] Herb Caen [a local newspaper columnist] printed a leaked document about how the government planned to attack the island from Angel Island. They were going to attack with PT Boats. And there was a meeting of the Indians, and a decision was made that now that we were “at war,” that all women would have to leave their [leadership] positions and the men, as warriors, would now take over. And this was accepted by everyone. But of course nothing changed — the women were still in charge — but the men were the warriors. (Laughter) I think that it's just clearer there because there's no subterfuge. It's there, black and white you know.

Women in SNCC — Early Years



Nashville sit-in, 1960. Matthew Walker,
Peggy Alexander, Diane Nash, Stanley
Hemphill

Wazir: From early '62 on, we had women [on the SNCC projects], and we never thought anything about them not being — There was no superior male or female superior. There were Colia Lidell, and Dorie Ladner, and Matie Bivins and a few others — Amelita Redman, and Helen O'Neill.

As a matter of fact, Helen O'Neill beat the hell out of Dewey Green, Jr. Something he said to her, around the Freedom House in Jackson, and she up and slapped the hell out of him — slapped him blind.

So we had some tough women with us.

They were really tough, like Dorie Ladner. We'd be at Amzie Moore's home, and she'd come and crawl in bed with me, and I knew not to touch her — not in any kind of way. I was her sleeping partner. Nobody else. I knew better. It was just an understanding. It was quite clear. We were partners in the struggle, working together. That was the experience I had with women in SNCC. That was my experience.

Now I know there were other experiences that other people had that were different from mine and [later] different from the early days. Those were the early days, the early and dangerous days, and people were there because they were committed. There wasn't any glory, any “freedom-high” stuff. You know what I'm talking about. Anybody who had the nerves and the guts and the craziness to be there was an equal at that time.

[Name withheld] — she wasn't on the [SNCC] staff, she was a student at Tougaloo College. And I heard some wild things about [her], but only in the sense that it was clear that she was a Southern white woman, and she had quite a good understanding that she wasn't there to compensate with Black men for all the hundred years of lynching and white men raping. So she was not approached in that way, by Black men.

But, on demonstrations, she would put Macarthur Cotton and Hollis [Watkins] in jeopardy by grabbing their hands and walking with them to infuriate the white man in a way. To possibly get the hell beat out of them. That's the kind of stuff I'd hear about [Name withheld].

Once they were traveling from some project at night and they got pulled over. And she was white and 21 and [felt she could do] all the things she wanted to do; she really couldn't understand why she had to hide. [Often someone would have to hide on the floor between the front and rear seats with a blanket over them so that the car would not look integrated when the cops looked through the windows.] When the cops, the highway patrol, pulled them over — Macarthur and Hollis they were also in the car — she was like, *"Enough of this. I'm sitting up."* [Laughter] And Macarthur grabbed her and said *"I'll choke you to death if you get up. If you raise your ass up."* [Laughter] Or something like that. So they got through that.

So naturally, after that, [Name withheld] didn't travel with them at night anymore. Those are the kind of things, stories I used to hear about her. [When she was the] only white woman that was in Mississippi working actively from '61 right on through '62, '63.

Bruce: Yeah, she was in that horrendous 1963 Jackson sit-in with Ann Moody and John Salter.

Wazir: Yeah, she was there. Yes, she was, and Betty Poole too.

Freedom Summer — 1964

Wazir: Of course after [Freedom Summer in] '64, it was a different thing. White women did start showing up, and it seemed to me, what I observed when I came back there then, were a few white women who were giving up guilt-action to Black men. *"Here I am, I pay for four hundred years."* And that was kind of sickening to me, but some of that was going on. And there were Black men who were takers on that.

Jean: I think, in SNCC, I don't know whether this is true in the other organizations in the South, something happened in Mississippi that was very different in 1964.



Boarding the busses for Mississippi, June 1964

Now we know that was the Freedom Summer, but there was something — actually there was a lot internal to the Freedom Summer having to do with white men, white women, especially white men and white women but also the relationship between Black men, that doesn't seem to have existed to that extent before and certainly not later.

But going back to your question about contradictions, when you look at 1964 Freedom Summer — it's nuts. In the sense that, even the conception of it — given the context of what the South was all about, as crazy as the South was in every respect including sexual relationships and every other kind of

relationship — the whole thing had to have been a contradiction. And the beauty of it was that was the point. [Laughter]

It's like it was brilliant, because that was the point, but yet — So there were contradictions on every single level imaginable. There was nothing that wasn't [a contradiction], it seems to me.

The Women of SNCC



SNCC organizers in dangerous Belzoni MS in the Fall of 1963

Jean: I had no idea there'd be so many women, so many Black women in SNCC, until I got down there. I was amazed at that, because in all of the political groups that I'd been in — in Ann Arbor, at Morgan State College, Northern Student Movement — they were overwhelmingly male. Black and white — but male. And by the time I'm meeting people [in the South], it's like Wazir says, I'm thinking, I've met a lot of different kinds of Black women in my life but I've never met anybody like these women. [Laughter]

Those women were tough. I mean, they were tough. And I can't see anybody taking advantage of them. And they were coming from — A lot of them were from the Howard group, but not all of them were from Howard. And yet you had people like Annie Pearl Avery —

Wazir: Annie Pearl Avery. As feminine as she could be, but just as tough —

Jean: Right, somebody pointed her out to me, at a big demonstration, they pointed her out, and they said, *"Remember you heard about the sister in Birmingham who walked up to a cop, got his gun and said, 'Now what are you going to do motherfucker?' That's her."* [Laughter]

[The following relevant excerpts are copied from the Judy Richardson Interview, 2007.]

Jean: Did you ever feel — You know, in subsequent years, a number of women in SNCC had said that they resented that they were office workers, secretaries, clerks and stuff like that. And in this stage, did you resent your work?

Judy: Not at all. Not at all. ...

There does come a point where I get tired of doing the minutes. And I get tired of the fact — as do other women in the office — of the fact that only the women are doing the minutes, even in the office. So that when the staff meeting happens, it's not just that I and Mary King are doing the minutes, it's that the guys aren't doing them — Julian [Bond] certainly isn't doin' no minutes. You know, Jimmy Bolton wasn't doing the minutes. You know, none of the men were doing the minutes. That's when we had — I still have the photo that I recently got a JPEG of — that sit-in in Forman's office. It's the Atlanta sit-in. And it's Bobbi Yancey, who of course is number two now at the Schomburg, and Mildred [Forman], and Mary King, Ruby Doris [Robinson], and I. And we're sitting down —

That's right! We're sitting down, and Danny Lyon took a photo of it, and we're holding placards reading "Freedom Over Me" and "No More Minutes." Oh no, "No More Minutes Until Freedom Comes to the Atlanta Office." That was Ruby's sign. And you know, we did it half playful, but the other thing was, we're not going to do this anymore. And you see Forman in the back. ...

Jean: But [the sit-in] worked. It obviously worked.

Judy: Well, see that was the point of SNCC. It was that as a woman, I mean I really did feel nurtured by the guys. I felt that they respected me for whatever skills I had. I felt that they —



Diane Nash
SNCC

You know, you never felt, for example, that Ruby Doris was not absolutely respected in that organization. I came in after Diane Nash, but the way people talked about Diane, even when I was there, was with so much admiration. I mean, it was a sense that women in the organization were respected for their capabilities — even within the context of sexism, that — (and yeah, you know, there was little stuff that would happen every once in a while). But most of the time, I never felt limited. Never limited about what I could do.

I remember when I came up with this idea for a residential freedom school, and I was going to bring young people from the Southern projects together with some of our Friends of SNCC support groups in the North.

And I was going to have the sessions take place a couple of weeks in southwest Georgia and a couple of weeks in Chicago. When I came up with this idea, nobody says to me, *"You have never done this. What the hell do you think you're doing?"*

Ivanhoe [Donaldson] says, *"Put down your thoughts. Do a proposal."* Tells me basically what I should do to get it funded. He said, *"Let me review it, and I'll tell you if there are any things I can think of."* And also start thinking about some foundations that you might want to submit it. It wasn't that he was going to do it, but that you might want to submit it to. I remember Stokely [Carmichael] saying, *"You tell me where you want me to be, and I'll be there. Tell me what time."* And he was. Charlie [Cobb] was there. Nobody, men or women, ever said, *"You don't know what you're doing."*

Jean: Yeah. That was my experience too. And I remember sometimes I didn't know what I was doing. [Laughter]

Judy: Exactly. That's right. Yes. I felt limitless possibilities in terms of — And it's exactly what you're saying. Pushed into things that I wasn't even sure about. ...

But, as a woman, I just felt absolutely powerful, just powerful. It was amazing. Actually, it's only when I get into the nationalist — we come up against some of the "narrow nationalists," as they say, in '68, that you suddenly realize, *"Oh, I see. All guys aren't like the SNCC guys. Okay."*

Jean: It took me years to learn that. It took me years. I thought all the [Movement] guys were like the SNCC guys.

Rita Walker

Chude: If I'm on the panel about women in the Movement, I want to talk about Rita Walker.

Jimmy: Who is Rita Walker?

Don: Rita was the wife of Sid Walker and they ran the Holly Springs Freedom House.

Chude: And Don just said a very interesting thing around this, which is that Rita Walker was "the wife of Sid Walker." But Rita Walker was involved way before Sid Walker. You see, really, Sid Walker was the husband of Rita Walker.

And I find it interesting because the little bit you read in Clayborne Carson's book [*In Struggle, SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*] and stuff, it sounds like Sid Walker's the main one because there's some memo from Sid Walker. But I met Sid Walker once that summer — Rita brought him by. She was already active first. So, right off the bat there's the whole question of, that the woman is the appendage of —



Rita Walker, Holly Springs, MS.
SNCC 1964

My experience of Rita Walker, who was a local, working-class woman, was that the first day I was in Holly Springs recruiting for the freedom schools it was raining and I was walking around with another white woman, and we were knocking on peoples' doors and giving them a leaflet. But we get to Rita's house and she opens the door, "*Come in, come in, sit down.*" It was wet, I remember so much it was wet, and we didn't want to sit on her sofa. "*No, no, sit down, sit down.*" And it was different from everybody else. She wasn't just polite to us.

Don: In my defense —

Chude: Yes, in your defense —

Don: I merely wanted to identify her so the people who might only know Sid and they would know what the connection, that's all I wanted to do. In my defense. (Lot of laughter.)

Chude: We understand. But Hardy, how did you meet Rita?

Hardy: I met Rita, well when I knocked on her door and introduced myself and said we was here, would she like to go register to vote. And she said "*Yeah, where have you guys been? We knew you guys were coming.*" And she was the first one that I got registered to vote. First person I got [to go down to] register to vote. I don't know if she got registered that time or not. I don't think so. But she was the first one I took downtown.

And you're historically right. She was much more involved earlier than Bud, that's what we called him — Bud. Because Bud at the time was working in construction in Memphis. So he went back and forth to Memphis every day. It's about 40-50 miles I guess. He went back and forth to Memphis every day to work. And so Rita had the time to come to the Movement.

Rita was — you had to know her in terms of her make-up to understand. If you see the film *Freedom on my Mind*, and you see the local person who was all involved, and spokesman for the rest of the community, she would be that case.

Don: I met Rita in the summer of '65. I knew her in two capacities. I met her first when I was a lawyer and I was told to meet at the Freedom House for whatever it was I was doing. And I remember complaining that they hadn't given me an address, just a street. And I figured how would I ever find it. Then I saw a sign with these two big hands shaking, Black and white hands, and I got a sense I didn't need to know the address. (Laughing) I got to the house and Rita just burst out with welcome, and my first thought was of what a very loving woman.

I was very new, I was only two weeks in the south and I was in a continuous state of anxiety. And Rita greeting me really calmed me down, and she introduced me to everybody and made me feel at home. And since I didn't know who everybody was, I assumed she was the leader of the Holly Springs Movement. And while Aviva [Futurian] was there, it was Rita who cared for all of my needs, made sure that I had eaten, made sure I had a bed to sleep in, Rita really took care of me. And she explained to me who everybody was and what was going on. And I have a very great affinity for her.

A few weeks later, I was working for Aviva and then replacing Aviva in Benton County, and now I was a SNCC worker and now I was dealing with Holly Springs as the neighboring county. So I was there as often as I could because I enjoyed the company so much. And once again, any time anybody new came



SNCC workers at funeral for the Birmingham children, 1963

in Rita would introduce me and explain to me who everybody was, introduced me to them, and made me feel welcome. Rita was a very important person to me, made everything in a tense world as secure as it could possibly be.

Rita & the Sheriff



Jean Fleming,
Nashville TN.

Don: We were arrested one night. They raided the house bringing whiskey in from the back and then arresting us for having alcohol. Which we knew wasn't true because we had been searching for alcohol all night and we couldn't find any (laughter), so we knew it wasn't ours. They didn't arrest me, they arrested Bud. That's right, Bud was the only person arrested and everybody else was a witness. And when we went to court, Flick Ash [the Sheriff] comes over [to Rita] *"I'd like to question you on what happened that night."*

And I said you can't question my witnesses, this isn't the scene of the crime, you can't question them. And he takes out a piece of paper and he says, *"You are interfering with the course of an investigation by a licensed police officer."* And the fact that he was reading it made me think I was being set up (laughter).

I went to the phone, and I called Jackson and they said yeah, *"You're being set up."* (laughter) And they said, *"It's your call, but they will arrest you."* And they were waiting for me, and I come back and I said to Rita, *"I advise you as your lawyer not to answer any questions on two grounds. One, is since you were present, you have a Fifth Amendment right not to speak; and two, you are my witness in this case and he has no right to be talking with you altogether."* And at that point they arrested me, and then they forced the trial to go on while I was in jail. So Bud got out, and I was in jail. (laughter)

Bruce: See, they knew how to treat lawyers back then. Let the prisoner out, put the lawyer in. (laughter)

Don: As I was being taken away, handcuffed, in the court house, Rita stood up and said *"You heard the lawyer, nobody is to talk to the sheriff."* So she was now committing the same crime I'd just been arrested for. (laughter) But they didn't arrest her. Probably they just wanted me. But I always counted on Rita, and I thought she was a wonderful person and I knew nothing about what had happened [SNCC dropping her from staff] until I went up to Benton County a few months ago and to Holly Springs for the reunion.

Rita and Her Kids

Chude: If you look at the question of women — for myself coming from an upper middle class white background where women stayed home with the kids, it didn't matter how much education they had, they still stayed home with the kids.

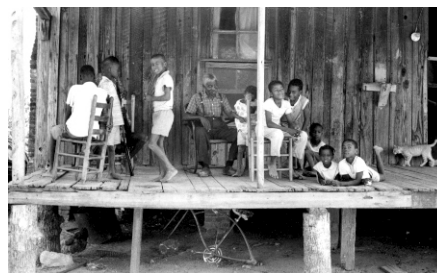
One of the contradictions I was confronted with was that Rita Walker left her kids with her mother and came and joined the Movement. And she was in my [Freedom School] class, and she influenced me immensely — her energy, her commitment, her desire to learn, all of these things. But I was wrestling myself, personally, with the fact that she wasn't home with her kids.

And when I think about how to be honest, that's one of the issues I've never been able to quite talk about, because it sounds so absurd. But I wrestled with it, because it came up against my upbringing and of course was one of those great gifts of opening up my world view. Because that's what happens when you confront a contradiction, right? Is you have to open up in order to understand it, or you run away from it, one or the other. So that was an example for me.

Rita & the Economics of Activism

Hardy: [Rita] was a very strong person and I think part of her being that strong person was that to a certain extent — even though they were poor — their income was independent of Mississippi. Bud was bringing the money, coming home from work from Memphis. And that was a big thing.

That made the Holly Springs project a lot different than say if we had been 50 miles or more down in the Delta. The people in Holly Springs were not tied to the cotton fields and the kind of agriculture like the people in Delta.



Mississippi sharecropper shack, 1964

Bud worked in Memphis and at that time, if you were working in any kind of labor, construction work, you were making a pretty good salary, *vis a vis* the rest of the people around you. So she had that, although she was raising the kids and all of that, she had a certain amount of freedom in terms of income.

All of that took place, in relevance to Memphis. You couldn't see Holy Springs and the Holly Springs project without having some kind of reference to Memphis. But you could go two counties down, to Benton or over to Batesville and all that, you got a whole different thing.

Rita and SNCC

Chude: Rita would come to the Freedom School in the morning and then go work on voter registration in the office in the afternoon that first summer. She was a local person who welcomed us, and who ultimately brought her husband and even the kids to the [Freedom] House. You know, she just made the Movement her life.

And at some point, as SNCC moved on, as it evolved, Holly Springs was deemed no longer a viable project and was dropped, dropping the Walkers [from the SNCC staff] who were by that time living in the Freedom House. What happened? I mean I know only that at some point, SNCC withdrew its support from the Holly Springs project, like '66 or '67. And by that time, Bud no longer worked [in Memphis] as far as I could tell, right? He was full time in the Movement?



Women trying to register to vote and the Selma AL courthouse, February 1965

Hardy: Yeah, as I remember, Rita was the first local person that we brought in to work in the office. She started out by volunteering. She was very interested in learning the skills of being a secretary and stuff. So that's why she introduced people coming in, she would be the person that primarily you would see there, or Kathryn Dahl. One of the two, that's who you would see because they would be the ones that would be in the Freedom House.

You would have thought probably that [Rita] had more education than she actually had. Because she lived right down the street from Rust and Mississippi Industrial [colleges]. They were all right there. So that's the kind of person she was. Strong, but also interested in learning. And she took up to the Freedom House real easy.

Don: Do you know why [the Holly Springs project] was deemed no longer — ?



Freedom Summer protest, Greenwood MS. 1964

Chude: According to what's in the books, they [SNCC] determined that [the Holly Springs project] had "lost connection" with the local people. But the question I've always had is that project always had a lot of white activists on it. Did it hit up against the separatism stuff, is that what caused it? I mean, what was it that happened that we could so successfully recruit somebody — some two people — and then at some point the Movement has left them and they just get dropped and they had to leave. They had to go, they had to leave the state in order to survive. He couldn't get work there.

Hardy: Well one of the things with the Holly Springs project, it had many whites after the summer. A lot of [Freedom Summer volunteers stayed. Aviva stayed, Michael Miller stayed, Ken Scudder stayed —

Chude: Gloria [Clark] came back.

Hardy: But also the Holly Springs Project also had a lot of students [from Rust and Mississippi Industrial colleges]. A lot of the students used to come because the Freedom House was right across the street [from the Rust campus]. And we pulled in a lot of the students who would be involved with SNCC, but they were staying on the campus.

You know, I could see where someone working down in Greenwood or somewhere would think that Holly Springs was a "bourgeois" project in quotes. Because of the circumstances of who were involved there, and having whites, having students. And they had a close proximity to Memphis so the violence wasn't as great as it was in other parts of the state. It wasn't a bad place to be in comparison to Yalobusha County, or what's the one, [on the way to the reunion] I drove from New Orleans, I drove through McComb.

Bruce: Amite County?

Hardy: Right, because I just wanted to see what it was like. And, [though] it was many years later, I could imagine all kinds of things, things that I wouldn't ever have felt would occur in Holly Springs. Flick Ash was bad, but he wasn't — I didn't see the threat that I've heard other people tell stories about. And he certainly wasn't Jim Clark, I knew that (laughter).

Don: I never heard of serious violence [in Holly Springs]. What was the cost to SNCC to keep [the Holly Springs project] going?

Chude: By this time I think [Rita and Bud] were on staff.

Hardy: They were probably on staff. Yeah.

Chude: They were on staff so they were cut, they were getting cut out. The thing that interests me is that they weren't being invited to come work on another project.

Bruce: What year are you talking about?

Chude: I'll have to look it up again. I would guess '67.

Hardy: It probably was 66, because I came to California and went to school and went back in '66 and they were there. I think it was right around the time of the James Meredith march. I was there for that, that's when I went back.

Chude: OK, so they were still there in '66.

Bruce: If SNCC cut off support in late '66 or sometime in '67 that was at a time when SNCC was cutting support for the majority of their projects. Because they had no money. And also there was the whole nationalism, separatism issue, but they also just didn't have any money.

Don: Post-Black power the money just stopped.

Bruce: And that was '66.

Hardy: When Black power came out, I was working with Mike [in San Francisco] and we were doing a newspaper [The Movement]. Terry Cannon, Mike, and a bunch of us we were doing a newspaper on 14th and Valencia. Man, when [SNCC's pro-Palestine position] came out, man, people were literally calling us on the phone, saying, "Never again." And I tried to explain to some people in Sacramento, what our position was. But it didn't matter.

Bruce: I think the point is that after the Black power thing came up which was July '66, and then the Palestine issue which I think was in early '67, from what I had read and from people I've talked to, pretty much SNCC was only able to keep going in Lowndes County, the Atlanta project, and maybe two or three others.

Hardy: I would say you're right, except the Mississippi people around those counties kept working. Doing whatever was done.

Bruce: And southwest Georgia kept going, Sherrod kept going. But I think they were carrying on as individuals working within a local community movement, not as SNCC staff. I don't believe they weren't getting any financial or organizational support from SNCC. They just kept on going on their own. Which, of course, was in a sense the real essence of the SNCC way.

Chude: OK, so according to Clayborne Carson, he's saying that in '66: *"Even more damaging to SNCC's southern effectiveness than the resignations of Lewis and Bond, was the deterioration of its field operations."* And he's partly placing that at losing some of the other key, experienced people. *"Other projects were also weakened by resignations and declining morale among organizers. In Mississippi serious challenges from more moderate Black leaders who wished to create an alternative to MFDP exacerbated long standing tensions between SNCC and pragmatic MFDP leader Lawrence Guyot."*

And then he says: *"Cleveland Sellers visited several Mississippi communities during the summer and found few SNCC staff members carrying out their responsibilities. He was particularly disturbed by the situation in Holly Springs, where he had once been project director, believing that the current director, Sid Walker, did not have the support of local Blacks in his decision to retain white staff members. When Sellers summarily closed the office and recommended that most of the staff be fired, Walker defended himself by arguing that the use of white volunteers was necessary since SNCC was not able to provide funds to hire full-time Black workers. Although Walker was unable to reverse Sellers' decision, this drastic action taken against allegedly non-productive Mississippi staff members did not stem the declining SNCC's effort in the state."* Ok, blah, blah, blah.

There are two things that are interesting about this. Number One is Rita Walker doesn't exist. Now I find that interesting, I actually find it sexist, but I also find it interesting that someone who had such a profound impact on anybody who went into Holly Springs does not exist as a person. Her husband does exist as the head of the project, but the criticism is they have no connection with the local community. And that they were using white staff members because it was a project that had been able to retain a number of white activists who had stayed and kept working. So, it's concerning me always that people can speak with such love about Rita, or respect or acknowledgment for the role she played, and yet, not only is the project eventually cut out, but she doesn't even exist in the book.

Hardy: It seems in the passage that you read, it's talking about the director. Now I don't know why they didn't make Rita the director. Certainly there had been a history of women as project directors in Mississippi — Cynthia Washington and all those people.

Bruce: I think there was a lot of internal politics going on around Black Power and the question of white civil rights workers. Maybe Holly Springs was cut because they had white workers and intended to keep on using them, not because they had necessarily lost touch with the community.

The Women of Mississippi

Hardy: [Rita] was also part of — there were a lot of tough women. When I say “tough,” I mean tough in the sense of willing to challenge the system. In that whole way of Ms. Modina. All those kind of people. There were a bunch of people. Ms. Modina ran a local restaurant, a cafe and stuff.

If I was to contrast [Rita] to [other] women, I would put her against the Polk Sisters. There were three sisters. They were called the Polk Sisters. Beverly —

Chude: Julie and Delois. In that summer of '64. Julie was a college student who came back and worked in voter registration.



Alma Mitchell Carnegie, Holmes Co. MS. First in her county to step forward in the voter-registration campaign of 1963.

Hardy: Right she was going to Tennessee State, no not Tennessee State, University of Tennessee at one of those campuses. So, they were the ones who opened us up to a lot of the churches, to a lot of the people because their daddy was a big farmer. He had a nice farm, a big farm.

Also Ms. Trotter. She was another person that was very instrumental in opening up and participating. In fact, most of the leadership that emerged for the Holly Springs Project — at first, early — were women. They were women.

When Aviva got involved in Benton County, she brought the Reeves family. But even the Reeves family you had a kind of split leadership if you look at it. The mother was a school teacher I think, and Mr. Reeves, I don't know what, I think he was a farmer.

We also had younger women involved [in Holly Springs]. I don't know about other counties. The Polk Sisters, Rita Walker, some of those people they were fairly young, none of those I think were 30 or older. Ms. Trotter and some of the other people were, but most of the people no.

I also think, if you're going to talk about it, you find different types of Black women. Just like when you went to Holly Springs you find a different type. I mean, my cousin, Victoria Gray, was not a field peasant. I mean she had lived in Europe, she had an independent income because her husband was a military man. When she was baby sitting me, her folks had money. Money in a Black sense. It seems to me that one could argue that different regions produced different kinds of Black Mississippi women who participated [in the Movement]. Ms. Annie Devine, the woman from Canton, just died recently. If you took Ms. Annie, that would be a way of looking at it for older women. Ms. Devine, Ms. Hamer, Ms. Gray, these were the three women that wound up being leaders and they came from fairly different backgrounds. I mean, Ms. Divine come out of Canton [MS] which is a bit of a town.

Women Were Home

Hardy: One of the reasons a lot of women came forward — when we were out there canvassing, when you were at somebody's house, particularly in the daytime when we first started canvassing, they were the only ones ever home. It's just that simple. They were the ones at home.

The husband was out at the 40, he was out working in the 40 acres somewhere. And if he was out working the 40 acres, he was probably either working some white man's crop or he was sharecropping.

So there was a whole different dynamic. You could go to the house, they say “come up” and they [the women] give you some cool water, and you sit there and the kids will be running around and you were there.

Jimmy: What you said about women being home more during the day than men, that was true. But there were times that I noticed that men could have been available but they weren't for whatever reason.

Women & Men — Differences in Danger

Miriam: I lived with a family in Columbus, MS. The woman told me this story. She said her family was in the car. The police stopped them. And the police ordered her 12 year old daughter to get out. She

said to the police officer, “*She’s only 12!*” And the police officer let it go. But what was so interesting is, the father kept his mouth shut. It was too dangerous for him to confront the [cop], but the mother could say something to protect her daughter. So, that's what I saw down there. It was not as dangerous for a Black woman to speak up as it was for a Black man to speak up.



Nonviolent protesters surrounded by white crowd, Gadsden AL, 1963

Jimmy: I'm glad you said that because all over the South I've noticed that in a lot of instances, there were a lot of married women who were involved whose husbands never got involved for that very reason. That they felt it was too dangerous.



Chapel Hill, NC. Injured protesters.

Bruce: Well I saw that pattern too, in both Alabama and Mississippi. But I would say one thing that the husband — and I'm generalizing — but that the husband may not have gotten involved in the same way as the wife — that is, going to mass meetings, marching, confronting the police. But often the husband was involved somewhat in the background as a protector.

Hardy: As a security person.

Bruce: Security in that yeah, his wife was out on the march, but if the Klan drove by and burned a cross on their yard, he was the one with the rifle.

Hardy: At night when we held the rallies, in these faroff counties the men — except for the [church] deacons and those people — the men always were the last to come in to the church because they had been out surveying the situation, they had weapons in their trucks and they were basically security.

The men I think saw two things. I think they saw themselves as being One, the protectors; and Two, they were the breadwinners to a certain extent. And that's what their role was. But they supported their wives in the Movement. And here again that's all in Northern Mississippi, I don't want to generalize to all of Mississippi because I don't know anything [except] basically northern Mississippi.

Jimmy: Well some of that is true in Alabama too. But I noticed that at a lot of our mass meetings, and other meetings that we had, when men could have been present, they weren't.

Sexual Contradictions

Chude: There is an argument that white women got trashed more than white men because of the combination of sexism and them being white. But whether a woman was southern white or northern white, one of the contradictions [was that] in the context of where they were in the South [when] a white woman came on the project it increased the danger because of the racist white male pathology around the question [of inter-racial sex].

But the other side of that pathology — the hysteria around sexuality — was, as far as I could tell, really about the fact that for hundreds of years, white men had been raping Black women. That was what that really came from. But it got switched around, and it didn't change the fact that when a white woman came on the project sometimes the Black men went a little loony too. Sometimes they didn't, but sometimes they did. So it's a contradiction.



Hollis Watkins & Arvenna Hall of SNCC after being released from jail. Jackson, MS, 1963.

Don: [In '66] I went with a white woman SNCC worker in Carrol County. And just about everybody else was Black in that entire movement, except her. And she had apparently rebuffed the primary Black man that had attempted to come on to her. I met her in the course of doing whatever I was doing, and we started going together. Immediately, her movement started collapsing. I would take her to eat in the Holiday Inn, and people would be furious that she was doing things now that they couldn't do or couldn't afford to do. I took her up to Benton County at one point, and other people objected that she was giving up her work, going off with the white man, and eventually it caused so much grief that it was really either her and me, or her and that Movement. And she said that she couldn't just give it all up, and so she gave me up. And that's how it ended.

Miriam: I'd like to talk about a couple of things that happened to me.

Don: Are these the ones not for your children's ears?

Miriam: I'm being aware of my children. [Laughter]

My first applications to SNCC in '61 were thrown in the waste basket because I was a white woman, and I find that —

Wazir: But who was making that decision though? What part of the country were they from? Where were those people in the SNCC office from?

Miriam: I applied to the SNCC office in Atlanta.

Wazir: That's an important question, because some of the people — For example, Jim Foreman is a person who was raised in Chicago but spent the summers in the South with his grandmother and when she died, his aunt, Miss Llewellyn. He wasn't from Mississippi, okay? And Bob was not from Mississippi, okay? He was in leadership, and people that had the power to make those kind of decisions basically weren't from the South.

Because people like me and others who were from the South, we didn't have any experience or contact with [white women] — we had contact with white people but on a different level, in a different way. Not socially in any degree, not to any degree, do you see what I'm saying? So it had to be somebody who at least had some kind of — we from the South couldn't have raised that question. We weren't in leadership anyway at that particular time.



On the March to Montgomery, 1965

Miriam: (Smiling) I was finally accepted into SNCC in the summer of '63, because Chuck McDew came to Brandeis for a semester and I was just friends with him. And because of that, the [Black] women in SNCC were not thinking that I'd be competition, and that's how I got accepted into SNCC.

There were two Black women on my first project. Jean Wheeler and Martha Prescod. Those turned out to be the only two Black women that I was friends with for the rest of SNCC. It was almost like we were part of a pledge class, we were all initiated together. And when I went to new projects I was a threat again.

Now back to this issue of difficulties with Black women. The Atlanta [SNCC] office would send my check to any project except the one I was on, and then it would make its way back to me about half the time. We were living a pretty tight subsistence, and it was a real hardship.

When I started in Mississippi, I had to get Bob's [Moses] permission. I called Bob in October of '63 and asked if I could come work in Mississippi, and he said no. He said I could come down for two weeks. So I went down and somebody stole my wallet from the Freedom House. I had no way to get back, so I stayed —

Wazir: What year was that?

Chude: This was October of '63.

Wazir: Yeah, [name withheld] was on the prowl then, yeah. [Laughter]

Miriam: Anyway, I had no way to get back North. I didn't have the money. And Bob confronted me and asked why I was still there. I told him what had happened. He shrugged and walked away.

So Flukey — whose real name is Mateo Suarez — was working on a CORE project in Meridian, and he asked me to join. And of course I was glad to do that. That's what I wanted to do in the first place. Bob called Flukey four days later and asked was I "*working*" or "*working out*," whether I was down there to work or to sleep around. That was how it was posed.

Now I've mentioned this when I've been interviewed currently by book [authors], and they're just astounded that I didn't have a sharper reaction to that. I mean, it is sort of insulting. [As if] why [else] would a white woman go there?

Let me see if there's anything else. Oh yes, what I wrote for our web site about the Assembly of Unrepresented People. In August of '65 we got arrested in an anti-war demonstration. It was a group of SNCC people and a group of Catholic pacifists. And we were in jail a couple days. What I remember is that the women who got bailed out first were often the girlfriends of the leaders.

[Another thing], there was a difference in style in how the guys I had dated up North flirted or wanted my attention, and how the Black guys did. [It was similar to an interview I read about a youth trip to Israel] where they talked to the kids, to the girls on that trip, about the difference in style, of the Israeli guys versus the Americans — same difference. And I don't know the words for it, but it was the culture, and it was more —

Don: Direct?

Miriam: Forward? Direct? Oh yes! On that project in Meridian, MS, John Baxter* [pseudonym for a charismatic Movement leader who played a central roll in the Movement for many years] arrived about

day five, and within five minutes he had propositioned me. And he was telling me how if I had sex I would be more relaxed, [Laughter]. And every other time I ran into him, it took him just about 60 seconds to proposition me. And I found that extremely insulting. I assumed that that worked for him, or he wouldn't have kept it up. Nowadays there are words for that.

Don: You mean sexual harassment.

Miriam: Yes!

Bruce: Yeah, everyone knew about Baxter*. In Selma he would go up to women, and this would be local women, volunteers, students, northern women, any woman, Black, white, whatever, and he would start talking to them about "*Are you willing to put your body on the line for the Movement?*" And he was definitely, clearly and explicitly, not talking about going out on demonstrations.

Jean: Ewww!

Wazir: Well, we know that much.

Bruce: And he would sometimes go into these rants about the water of life, meaning his sperm.

Jean: Oh! [Disgusted]

Bruce: Well, he was a unique case. John Baxter* was always John Baxter*.

Women — Black & White

Chude: I think for those of us who were Northerners — coming South — if we were white, it was the first time we were really conscious of how white we were. Because of course the dominant group never carries its own identification in the same way —

Ours was a very heterosexual movement. Nobody ever says that, right? Because it's the dominant thing. But it was a very heterosexual and homophobic movement in that period.

But in terms of being in the dominant group racially, it was only when I went south that I became aware of myself as a white woman. When I was an exchange student at Spelman I was aware that there was always the question of dating the Black students, and I didn't in fact date the Black students, for an odd reason. Because the first night, some of them had asked me out to a snack bar, and one of them asked me if I would ever marry a Negro, and I said that I would try very hard not to, because it would clearly be difficult, but that if I loved him I would. So I thought I'd said "*yes,*" and they all thought I'd said "*no.*" [Laughter]

I was a member of the Canterbury House of the Episcopal youth group, so I did all these things with Morehouse guys that were Episcopalians, and some of them were very good friends, but nobody ever asked me out. And to the degree I dated there, the one I fell in love with was a white student at Morehouse, but I dated a guy at the University of Georgia who was in the Movement too. So I didn't have that sense of sexual tension with the Black students. It wasn't there for me.

And so what I had was friendships. And it was quite wonderful. It was better than it had been at Carleton [College] where people were very uptight and didn't do a lot of interaction. And at Morehouse, Spelman, if you were using the main library and it was raining and you didn't have an umbrella, literally, a young man would say, "*Can I walk you back to the dorm?*" And you would walk back to the dorm, and nobody expected a kiss. Nobody expected anything; they just did it. It was quite wonderful.

I mean, it was a kind of southern — what you'd call hospitality — that was just humanizing. So here was my experience of how much more human it was at Spelman and Morehouse than it had been in Northfield, Minnesota where those cold Nordic types are.



March on Washington, 1963

In my relationships with the girls on the campus, I had gotten put in as a roommate with someone who had gotten back into school by telling on a friend, because they both had been caught staying out all night. And so everyone was mad at her, and they'd given me her as a roommate. And so then she began to use all the things that I did that rubbed anybody the wrong way as her way of getting back in with the [other] girls. So there was all this tension going on, and I had this one really, really good friend who some of the other students tried to pressure her not to be my friend, and she was not willing to have anybody tell her what to do.

And in all of this tension, as it was working its way out, and I was going through the changes I needed to go through and understand what was my part in it, there were young men, and a particular one, Barry Gaither, who is now quite a good artist, who came to me and said, *"I want you to know I'm here for you. I'm your friend."* So that was my experience. And there's something that happened which is a different story I'll tell some time at Spelman that shifted everything, and all of a sudden I was there at Spelman, and the students were saying hello to me and treating me as a person.

And I had by then also figured out that some people at Spelman would never like me, because I was an activist. And they were not activists, they were more conservative. Or I had certain different values. I was beginning to figure out that some people are never going to like you. It's not just a question of if you worked on your racism and your white supremacist attitudes; it doesn't change the fact that some people will never [like you] because of who you are. And you have to figure out who you are and be in your own integrity.

The gift of that Spelman and Morehouse experience for me was that I went through very big changes. I learned a lot about arrogance, my own arrogance as a northerner, as an upper middle class woman. Along with making one of the most profound friendships with a woman that I ever had, and having some really good friends amongst the men who treated me as a person.

Then I go to Mississippi where there is that whole different dynamic. I mean, first of all I go to the training, and we get warned by Vincent Harding and some of the others about being careful about being a white woman in Mississippi and what it would mean.

I [entered] into an environment which was highly sexualized, in which there is this ongoing obsessiveness — on everybody's part it seemed to me — about who was sleeping with whom, in particular Black male - white female. And I experienced it as phenomenally dehumanizing. And it took me many, many, many years to understand that, amongst other things, I'd been declassified. And that in fact most poor women have always been treated as sexualized beings who are available to men of higher classes than them. And that perception didn't come until 10 years ago or so.



Bruce: That's an important point. And if I might add an aside, sexual submission of poor Black women to white men — particularly higher-class white men — was actually recognized by the Southern legal system. They called it "paramour rights," meaning the right of white men to Black women without any legal responsibility or consequence. There was a famous murder trial in Florida in the early 1950s which Zora Neal Hurston and William Bradford Huie wrote about. A Black women named Ruby McCollum shot the white state senator who had fathered two children by her, and the prosecution claimed that under "paramour rights" the question of forced sex could not be entered into testimony.

Chude: For years I'd try to work through what was going on that was so dehumanizing about [the situation in Mississippi during Freedom Summer]. What was it? Because it was coming from outside. This is a contradiction from the outside. Nobody inside is necessarily doing anything. I mean, I have one of those stories too. Wayne Yancy came bopping into the kitchen where I was doing something. I don't think it was 60 seconds, *"Hi! You want to sleep together?"* [Laughter]

And I was a little prude, right? I mean, I'm not even sexually experienced, so I was just horrified. And of course then he gets killed, and then I'm feeling guilty because I hadn't liked him, and he's dead, right? It was just horrible. And it took me years to work it out that yes, that was dehumanizing. It was the context, you know, that we were all in. And he was northern. He was not southern. He was northern. Chicago.

And it turns out, he asked everybody he bumped into, and eventually somebody said *"yes."* And they stayed stable over the summer, and in fact after that, he never was — He wasn't aggressive; he wasn't obnoxious. And he wasn't obnoxious about her. When you're older and you look back and you think, *"Well, you know, it wasn't — It happened, and it was dehumanizing, but then we all went on, and we were people, you know, people together."* So I look upon the sexual thing as being primarily from the outside.

Jean: What does that mean to you?

Chude: It means that there was almost like — You know how humidity is? You walk outside, and it's like a blanket there? I mean, it's like you feel it? Well, it was like you felt it. It was all around you all the time. So when Miriam says that even as early as '62 or '63, they're not going to let her come because she might sleep with people? I mean, how many white women have been sleeping with people by '62 that could make anybody think that? It can't be from practice; it has to be from the atmosphere, the outside. Of course, if we count Baxter* — [Laughter].

Sex, Youth, and Stereotypes

Jean: When you look back on it now, given our ages now, and we're talking 40 years ago, we were all in our twenties.

Wazir: We were very young.

Jean: Some of us in our early twenties. [Laughter] You know, Judy [Richardson] and Charlie [Cobb] were 18!

Wazir: That's right.

Jean: So there is going to be a high sexual charge to any atmosphere in which young men and young women have nobody around them, no adults around them —

Wazir: To say *"No."*

Jean: To say *"no"* or *"where are you going?"* Or whatever. And I think that may be important, because we're coming just out of the fifties, when people didn't even talk about sex openly. So part of it is, I think, our age [at that time]. Part of it is, I think, that we find ourselves in the most sexually repressed region of the country, which is saying a lot, given the mid-West, but the South is —

Part of it is this novelty that people who have always been apart are now in the same space, Black people and white people. Part of it is a number of stereotypes, because what else did we have? There was no way that we could have known each other until we all got together, because the society



wouldn't allow it. So you're really, really struggling against your own stereotypes here, because it's all you have when you look at the other.



Women and girls arrested in Birmingham AL, 1963.

“Going Through Changes”

Email from Cathy Cade, March 2005

I have been remembering back to being in the Civil rights Movement. We'd gather for a SNCC staff meeting, people driving in from all over the South. We might not have seen each other for a couple of months. We'd greet each other with “*How have you been?*” the answer if there was some, any, kind of closeness would be: (said seriously, apologetically or jauntily) “*I've been going through changes.*”

No matter the tone, we would know this person was dealing with a lot of fear, possibly grief, probably “*What am I supposed to do now?*” It was understood that this process was hard and important. It was respected.

The response to “*I've been going through changes*” was a moment of eye contact with a fully-felt, “*It's good to see you.*”///

For me this exchange happened mostly with Black men, more than a few. It was a way of loving.

Community Standards



Community mass meeting, Orangeburg SC, 1963

Jean: But I want to go back to this thing of our ages and the fact that it would be sexually charged anyway, because there was a time when I had a very hard time with some of the white women who came down to teach at Tuskegee. And some of them I said something to [as a fellow teacher], and others I totally ignored. And they were in the majority. I had two close friends out of those — a lot of white women — and they were Maggie [??] and Leslie [??].

The others were — it sounds so weird to say it now — I never knew that women could be so immodest. I had never known that they would dress in a certain way that was clearly meant to do nothing but attract the eyes of men. Men of whatever color, but of men. I had never seen that. I had never even seen it in caricature. And it would have looked strange to me in Philadelphia, but in the rural South it was outrageous. And it was highly disliked by Black people, young and old, because they thought it was a sign of disrespect.

Wazir: Exactly. I mean even on the very — close to what you all would call illiterate. When they would see that, it came across [to them] like — just because we're Black people, you don't have no respect for us.

Jean: That's how people thought. That was happening around all the campuses. It wasn't just Tuskegee. And I'm talking here about young people who come down to teach. I'm not talking about white students at Tuskegee. I'm talking about people in front of the classrooms. And so part of me says that there were a lot of people down there that shouldn't have been down there. And who, if I'd known, if I'd been doing any recruiting, knowing what I knew then, I'd be very, very careful about who among the white women I would send down there. I would try not to offend the ones that got there, but I'd be real tough in who I would say to, "You got it. See you in Jackson."

I also understand, though, that attitude of they were feeling a sense of freedom. They weren't around their parents either. They weren't at school. They didn't have their teachers to worry about. They let it all hang out. They were the first hippies I ever saw, but it wasn't cool to be a hippie in the Black South, not among the Black population.

Breaking the Barriers: Sex in Black & White

Don: In Selma in 67-68, most of the Movement was coupled, and almost entirely interracial. And like [Dr. Alvin] Poussaint said in his paper *Stresses on the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, there was a great sense that Black/white sexual relationships were part of the Movement. Not that you went down for that reason, but it was part of breaking the barriers. And so what we found in Selma was that almost everybody was coupled and interracial.

I got into a bad situation. I was living with a Black woman who had three children in Selma, and I'd been going to a lot of conferences in Birmingham, and she was a little annoyed that I never took her along. So on this one trip, I decided that I would take her. So I took her and the three children, and we were staying at the Gaston Motel, where there was a restaurant, right? And we were in the coffee shop, and I'm there for an SCLC something. And the manager comes over, and he says, "I want to ask you to leave."

And I thought he was joking, because I mean this is like the one oasis in the whole area. And he says, "There's a mob gathered outside, of Blacks, and they're yelling about this white dude who's taken a sister away from her man with her children, and it's all this white guy's doing." And he says, "They're building up, and I don't want them wrecking the place." I said, "Well, fuck you. I'm not going out there! Are you crazy?" [Laughter]

And so I eventually called SCLC, and Andy Young came driving over and told them that she was my secretary. And that therefore everything was all right. And that was the end of it. It was also the last time I ever traveled with her after that also.

But Poussaint, he was really a terrific guy. And the stuff he wrote was great. In terms of local Blacks, they had been on the other end of it for so long, you know all the way back to slavery with their women being raped by white men and the penalties for the Blacks looking in the direction of a white woman, that there was almost this irresistible urge to break that taboo which was so appealing.



Farmville VA, 1963

I remember the quote he [Poussaint] talked about. He was also doing therapy while he was there, and this Black young man said to him, *"Whenever I'm with a white woman, I can't make up my mind whether I want to sleep with her or beat her up."* And that was a very strong feeling going on.

White women in — and now I'm off Poussaint — white women in Selma, who were there working with me, they had, for different reasons, the same attraction. That it [sex with Black men] was something that they never dared to do in the North, and that, combined with Movement feelings, made them want to have that experience. And they were also felt under a lot of pressure. I'm sure you've heard the thing [from Black men], *"You'd sleep with me if I were white."* And they wanted to prove that they weren't [racist], so they have the combination of both the pressure and the wanting to.

White men, I can't speak too closely, because I had lived in Greenwich Village, and I'd already had those experiences because of the Village. But most of the white men that I met just found it very stimulating to again do what they couldn't do in the North [sleep with Black women]. It was very similar to the women.

And the main experience that I had is that it's true. Sex was a major preoccupation. But in a way, that's why people started coupling, because it was getting both so distracting and unnerving that it was easier to try to settle in to some extent.

Ironically, today I had one of those experiences in that I'm running a political campaign for a Black man who's married to a white woman. And I was in his house, a woman walks by — a Black woman — and she sees the signs and she's asking me, and I say, *"Oh, come on and meet him,"* and I pushed things along, to get her to be a volunteer. I go into the house to pull him out, but he was not there. His wife was there. I said [to myself], *"No, this is going to backfire. I'm not going to do this."* So I just immediately gave up the idea of introducing her, and I also left her [the wife] out of the photograph in the brochure for the same reason. Because I know there is still this tension as there was in the South, which we haven't talked about, have we? About Black women's resentment, of Black men's resentment, of Black women and white men.

Sex and Civil Rights Workers



Gloria Larry, Ruby Sales, Jimmy Rogers, SNCC.
Lowndes County AL, 1965

Bruce: There's also the dynamic of male Civil Rights workers and local community girls. You [Chude] had started this with "contradictions," and I'm still not exactly sure what that means, but I'm real sure on what "tensions" are.

Chude: OK, tensions.

Bruce: And at least for me, I had never, ever, before that situation — or ever, ever since then — been in a situation where lots of beautiful young women wanted to go out with me.

Wazir: That's right.

Bruce: I had never experienced women coming on to me like that before. And I've never had women coming on to me like that again.

Don: No wonder you're nostalgic!

Bruce: Tell me about it! [Laughter]

When I first came to Selma I was living with the famous West family who had four absolutely beautiful teenage daughters, and as I recall, one was college age, three were high school age. And talk about [sexual] tension [on my part]....

I had read Lillian Smith before I went South. I had read a lot of books before I went South because I was weird that way — it's what I did. But the only two things that I read before going South that turned out to be of any actual use to me were Lillian Smith's book *The Killers of the Dream*, which described the intersection and relationship between race and sex in the South. And Faulkner's novels which talked about the craziness of the South. Both were very helpful.

I had decided — and I think it was the right decision — that I was not going to have relations with any local girls. And I'm saying "girls" deliberately, meaning high school age girls. Or, for that matter, with any local women who were not Movement staff or activists themselves.

It was so hard. It was so hard. I had to invent — I invented a girlfriend in California who was in jail for a Civil Rights demonstration as the only way in which I could explain and excuse why I would not go out [with the local young girls].

And I think for young men — Black and white — and we were really young — this was a situation that was so extreme. Every one of us had to figure out some way to handle this. And some handled it one way, and some handled it another.

I think I made the right choice — hard as it was — because I saw that the Civil Rights workers — men, Black and white — who did end up sleeping around with the local girls and the local young women — it hurt their work. It really hurt their work in terms of how others in the community, particularly the adults and parents, viewed them and reacted to them.

And for me, some of it would have been — "*What's this white man doing with these Black girls?*" — because of the whole history of white men and Black women in the South. But also — for both Black and white male activists — there was a lot of jealousy against us. Because — for whatever reason — there was this glamour. "*They're Freedom Fighters! They're Freedom Riders!*" And local young men felt this was really unfair competition, and I think they were probably right.

Oddly enough, one of the things that helped me stick to that decision was that I had grown up in a family where both my mother and father were union organizers in the '30s. I've told you all that story. And I grew up on tales from my father and my mother, sitting around the kitchen table talking about — "*Oh remember old so-and-so?*" "*Yeah, he was the leader in St. Louis, and he started having an affair with the wife of so-and-so, and that blew the whole organizing drive.*" And I had heard those stories just — you know — not like a lecture or anything. It was just part of the reminiscences around the kitchen table, "*Oh, this guy did such and so in Milwaukee, and the results were —*"

Yet, still, there was this enormous sexual — for me it was tension, but for others it was an opportunity to be a male Civil Rights worker and have all these local girls and local young women.

Wazir: Well, the way Sam Block and I began to handle this [in Greenwood, MS] — At first, it wasn't a problem. But then we finally got an office on Avenue N around the winter of '63, after we'd been run out of the building on MacLaurin Street. Mr. Dave Sanders let us have this particular building and Bob [Moses] came to approve it and [Sanders] just leased it to us for an astronomical number of years. So he's letting us be there. The depth of the building was about the same depth as Don's house here. And it had an upstairs to it, and it had a little front [room] downstairs that was no larger than this [living room] and had been rented for a church. But when we came along, he kicked out whoever had the little church, the little chapel. He kicked them out, so we could use that to do workshops in. So it just fit the bill all around.

And when the [donated] books began to come down in the summertime ['63], the first group of people who came down from Southern Illinois University with a bunch of books, John O'Neill and a few other people, they started using our upstairs building to catalog and index books to send out to other projects. So we had that.

And so then early on, these young ladies start coming by, they were high school age. They were anywhere from juniors to seniors, and they were — Me and Sam were young, we were 21, 22, 23. Sam said, "*Wow, man, what are we going to do about [this]? Let's just start a Black history class.*" Because Bob [Moses] and them had just gotten out of jail in '61 for Contributing To The Delinquency Of Minors when the [Brenda] Travis girl had gotten in jail [for demonstrating] and all that kind of stuff.



So we were aware of that, so we had to be careful. So we started teaching. I think we were the first ones that started calling it a "Freedom School." So we were supplementing the history, the Black history that they weren't getting. And so they were fascinated by it, and so the numbers increased. The numbers increased. We started utilizing them to do canvassing [for voter registration]. We taught them how to canvas, how to talk to people about attempting to register to vote.

In other words, we put them to work. And that didn't stop them. They were attracted to us. And then the local boys that you're talking about, they got *envious and jealous*. So a few of them started coming. A few of the guys started getting involved. "*Maybe if we get involved in the Civil Rights, we get the same flair and fame as these two guys are getting.*" Because we always had some guys working with us, like George Greene and Gunner and Hempholl, and a guy named Joe E. Lofton and a few others that were always working from '62 on.

But in the main, you had to be really acrobatic to keep those girls off of you. And it was because they had never seen anybody face the Southern racist white-man power structure before. And that was magnetism. They wanted to get close to you. I mean, they wanted to be up on you. And like one young lady, Sam said to her, "*I can't sleep with you. You get pregnant and —*" She said, "*That would be good. Then I'd have something of yours.*" They didn't care. They didn't care.

Email from Cathy Cade, March 2005

I was most interested in the mention of local young women who wanted to have children with the freedom fighters. I think it was Wazir who once told me the children were referred to in the '60s as "Freedom Babies." I remember in the 1960s — as I was in the civil rights movement and a graduate student at Tulane — being really worried for these young women having children with little assurance of support. I hate to admit it, but I also felt critical of them.

But by the 1980s I was a lesbian and when deciding on a sperm donor for my second child I chose a Black donor. (I'm white.) At Christmas this year my son, almost 20, announced to our family gathering that he was my souvenir of the civil rights movement. I smiled, relieved that my choice was finally being talked about openly. It took me several hours after reading this "men/women conversation" to realize that my son was my "Freedom Baby."

Wazir: One guy on SNCC's staff, he got pretty notorious. We had to take him out of town, out of LeFlore County, because he couldn't stand the temptation. And the local mothers, a few of the local mothers — about three or four or five of them — came to us complaining about him, and then we got him out of town. [Then they] said, "*What happened to so-and-so?*" I said, "*Well, we got rid of him because of, with your — Oh, we didn't intend for you all to run him out of town!*" [Laughter]

So they [the community] really over-looked a lot of the stuff, what SNCC's staff and people did. They looked at what we were there for. They didn't look at a lot of the mistakes and stuff we made, especially with the young ladies. We had these local, young, single teachers there. They weren't going to go down and attempt to register to vote, [but] according to John Baxter*'s universe, [they] put their bodies in the struggle and into the Movement. That kept us from having to deal with those young high school girls. But finally Sam did, he crossed the line, and he married her. His first wife was a local high school senior — Peggy.

But that sexual dynamic was there. And if you were a Civil Rights worker, it didn't matter what color you were, Black or white. They were coming in like kamikaze pilots at us. I know that was our experience in Mississippi.

Miriam: In Albany, I heard, since I wasn't around at that time, I won't name names, but one of the organizers got one of the local girls pregnant.

Wazir: I know who you're talking about.

Miriam: The girl's father was livid.

Wazir: Yeah.

Bruce: There was a situation. Again, I too will not name a name, but I was told some time later — and I trust the person who told me — that there was a young SCLC staff person in Selma who got a 13-year-old pregnant. We [SCLC staff] found out about this later, or maybe the leaders knew, but those of us down lower on the staff didn't know. But Sheriff Jim Clark found out about it and told him, *"Well, you can spend the next 20 years of your life in Atmore Prison [for statutory rape] or you can be our snitch and tell us everything that goes on in the SCLC meetings."*

And he did [snitch]. But that didn't bother me because what Clark didn't understand — and could never grasp — was that as a nonviolent movement we didn't have any secrets. We always assumed that whatever we said and planned would get back to them, so we simply developed strategies and tactics that didn't require any secrecy. That was a fundamental tenet of nonviolence, to tell our adversaries what we were going to do, and then go do it. We assumed they had snitches in every meeting, that every phone was tapped, that every room was bugged, that we lived in a fish-bowl 24/7. And we planned accordingly. So if that SCLC guy could avoid a prison sentence by giving info to Clark, it was fine by me.

Don: What year was that?

Bruce: That was early '65. That was all during the time — That was right from the time of the march, right at that whole time. I don't know when it started, because I didn't hear about this story until '66. And it had gradually trickled down to the lower ranks of the staff.

Women of SCLC and CORE

Bruce: As we've been talking, it occurred to me that there is no greater difference between SNCC and SCLC than the role of women. The role of women in SCLC was quite different from SNCC. It was night and day between SCLC and SNCC. For one thing, in SCLC there were very few women — period.

Within SCLC, many of the leaders had this old-style preacher-mentality about women. Not just about what a woman's 'proper role' was, but unconscious assumptions of what women could — and even more important could NOT do — that was



Voter registration class taught by Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson of SCLC.

strikingly different from SNCC's attitude, even though I understand that there were problems within SNCC.

By the time I was on SCLC staff, Ella Baker had been forced out. All of the main SCLC leaders had a female secretary back in Atlanta, which was an accepted traditional role. Of the few SCLC women on staff that I knew out in the field [Alabama & Mississippi] most — with one or two exceptions — were in the Citizenship Program, SCLC's education arm, which was kind of a woman's ghetto (though there were some men in it too). It was like teacher and secretary are traditional woman's roles, so put the SCLC women there.

Wazir: Annell Ponder.



Annell Ponder, SCLC.
Greenwood Mississippi.

Bruce: Yes, right, Annell, Dorothy Cotton, Septima Clark, all in the Citizenship Program. And this difference is so striking when you think of Annell Ponder — who in my opinion was SNCC in essence except for the actual fact that she worked for SCLC. She was a SNCC-type woman except that she worked for SCLC.

And Dorothy Cotton too. Almost nobody ever talks about her and she was never given the place she deserved; she should have been recognized for her leadership on the same level as some of the famous SCLC men. She was a long-time civil rights worker originally from St. Petersburg VA, she led street demonstrations in Birmingham in the teeth of the worst of it, she led some of the most dangerous and most brutally attacked marches of the entire Movement in St. Augustine going right up against Klan mobs — in

night marches — integrating those beaches where it was open-season on demonstrators.

And during the Selma campaign she led actions in some of the most ruthless and dangerous of the rural counties, like Wilcox where the cops viciously attacked and gassed the march. She led mass meetings and she was an awesome singer. But organizationally, they kept her in the Citizenship Program, almost like she was in a closet and they were hiding her from the public and the media.

Jean: That is something I'd like to pursue at a later time, for instance, in the organizations. But I do want to ask Bruce one thing. What about CORE?

Bruce: Well, from what I saw, CORE did not have anywhere near the breadth of women's leadership that SNCC did, though I think they were more open to it than was SCLC. I think that Mary Hamilton was one of the few CORE field secretaries in the South. Maybe for awhile she was the only one.



Genora Covington, 16, Monroe NC.
1961. CORE.

The Movement Was Our Life

Bruce: I was with CORE mainly in the North. And it was different in the North because you had your civilian life that paralleled your Movement life. In the South, you know, you were in the Movement 110% of the time.

Don: That's right. There's no comparison.

Chude: Actually, I think that's important. I don't think we've ever said that on any of our tapings, that it wasn't like you did —

Don: You didn't go home at night.

Chude: You didn't go home at night. Right.

Wazir: You were there 24/7.

Chude: Yes. It was your whole entire life.

Wazir: It was your whole life.

Bruce: In the Northern Movement, no matter how dedicated you were, you still had other parts of your life — school, a job, maybe a family. You went to movies and shows, you socialized outside the Movement — whatever. You could rest, you could get away from it for a few moments, even a few days. And there wasn't so much the physical-danger, life-threatening constant fear. So that meant that man- woman roles and relationships were — what can I say — more “normal.”

And you know, we talked about this before, when you do two or three or four years of that being your whole life, and then you leave, you have no training, experience, or understanding of what to do in a real, regular life. Particularly for some people who went directly from school, which is sort of a half-life, into the Movement —

Wazir: Yeah, that's what I did.

Bruce: And then you're three or four years in the Movement life, and now suddenly you're out, and you're in Chicago or New York or San Francisco, and what the fuck are you doing with your life?

Don: But I'm not sure it mattered what you did before. The South was so unique in both the 24/7 and the risk and the camaraderie —

Bruce: And the intensity.

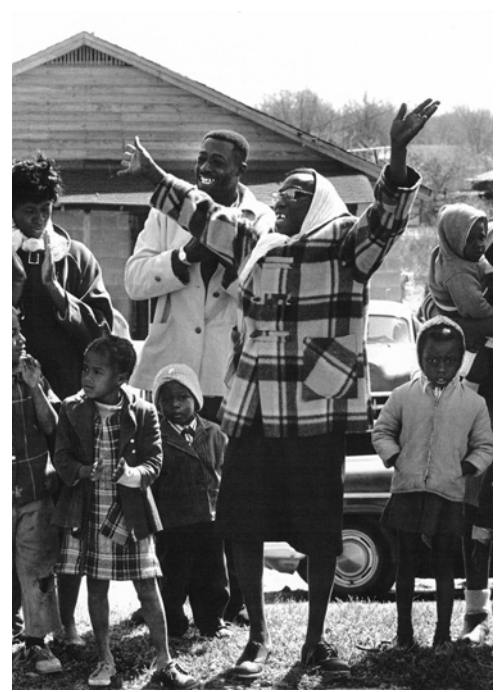
Don: And the intensity, that when you left it, it was a vacuum beyond imagining.

Wazir: And we must mention, that's why our camaraderie will be to the end of the — I say the world — for generations to come. If we put the history together, maybe they'll understand the camaraderie and what we had. But they can't really understand it, because nobody — they didn't live it.

Don: Well said, well said.

Wazir: They didn't live it. We could have battles and arguments with each other, even across other organizations like SCLC or CORE or other organizations, but that camaraderie — And that's what was the killer, when we had to depart from each other.

Miriam: I think that's a whole other taped discussion — that whole re-entry. I was really afraid to touch this topic [of women & men in the Movement], and we've done quite well.



Lowndes County, AL. 1965