

EDITED BY EMILYE CROSBY



Civil Rights History
from the Ground Up

*Local Struggles,
a National Movement*

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That Movement Responsibility

An Interview with Judy Richardson on Movement Values and Movement History

Note: This interview text is drawn from several in-depth interviews with Richardson, conducted by Emilye Crosby, between July 2005 and July 2007. The interviews have been consolidated, organized, and edited for clarity and readability. A brief introduction precedes the interview.

INTRODUCTION

I first met Judy Richardson in spring 1999 in what might be considered typical SNCC fashion. I went to the George Eastman House in Rochester to hear four former SNCC staffers, including Richardson, talk about their photographic work with the organization. I was with a long-time SNCC friend, Worth Long, who was scheduled to speak the next day at Geneseo. After the presentation, Worth invited his SNCC friends to join him and all four immediately agreed. In exchange for lunch, they generously spent most of the afternoon with my students—talking about their work as movement activists, cultural documentarians, artists, and organizers. Richardson returned to Geneseo in spring 2005 for a more formal lecture and it was during this visit that we began the conversations that led to the interviews in this book.

It isn't really surprising that Judy agreed so quickly when I asked if I could interview her. Over the years, she has been extremely generous with her time, granting interviews and discussing projects with a seemingly endless succession of students and scholars. When we began our interviews, I didn't have any "product" in mind. I was primarily focused on recording her stories and increasingly absorbed by our in-depth and wide-ranging conversations. After several multi-day interview sessions, however, I began to think more about "doing something" with this material. I found Judy's experiences

and perspective compelling and thought they could be valuable to others. When I raised the possibility, Judy didn't say no, but she also wasn't entirely sure. Although she never said it this way, I think she sees giving interviews as being about the history, while she was concerned that publishing an interview would put too much emphasis on her, possibly implying a sense of self-importance that she didn't feel and that she considered at odds with the movement values she absorbed and embraced with SNCC.

This same attitude is reflected in Judy's approach to her lectures and workshops on the movement. She never set out to do public speaking and was initially terrified to speak in front of, as she says, any group larger than three people. And yet, just as Judy's movement work brought her into *Eyes on the Prize*, her work on *Eyes* brought her into other ways of documenting and teaching movement history. When a lecture bureau called Blackside looking for someone who could talk about *Eyes*, the call was eventually referred to Judy, and shortly thereafter, Henry Hampton (Blackside's head and founder) asked her to take on the newly created position of education director. Richardson reflects that, among other things, this was a way for Hampton to keep her on payroll at a point when neither she nor Hampton saw her as a filmmaker and there wasn't any other obvious role for her in the company. Over the next few years, as Blackside became one of the premier documentary production companies in the nation, she moved back and forth between education work and production. (For example, she served as coproducer on Blackside's 1994 PBS documentary *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* for "The American Experience.")¹

By the time Richardson left Blackside and began working with Northern Light Productions, she was a filmmaker. Although she has worked on a wide range of projects, movement history remains her passion, and in recent years she produced a one-hour PBS documentary, *Scarred Justice*, on the 1968 Orangeburg Massacre (S.C.), and all the videos for the National Park Service's Little Rock Crisis Visitor Center. In addition to her lectures, workshops, and filmmaking, Richardson continues to find many ways to document and share movement history. One of the most significant undertakings is the book *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. Richardson and five coeditors (all women who were on SNCC staff) have devoted considerable time over the past decade to this collection, which brings together contributions by fifty-two SNCC women.²

When Richardson makes presentations about the movement, she tends

to talk very little about herself. Instead, she emphasizes the activism and potential of ordinary people—during the movement and today. She highlights her colleagues in SNCC and the local women and men who worked with and supported them. She draws extensively on her own study of the movement, sharing quotes and stories from a wide range of people. Holding up magazine covers and newspaper clippings, she tells stories about the work SNCC folk have continued to do since the movement, in part because she is so proud of their accomplishments, but also to make the point that so many of them have continued to struggle, and struggle effectively, for racial justice (as organizers, teachers, medical personnel, writers, artists, and more). She also makes it a point to address contemporary issues, even when they are uncomfortable. As she notes, it would undoubtedly be more fun and probably less stressful to focus only on the movement, telling glorious uplifting stories. And yet she feels a responsibility, one she attributes to the values of the movement, to use her talks to make connections between past and present, to draw attention to current injustices. Because of this, she often tackles challenging and contested topics like affirmative action, economic inequality, and unjust wars.

Watching Judy present you would never know that she struggled with public speaking or was terrified to stand in front of an audience. She exudes warmth and energy. Moreover, it is obvious that she is completely engaged, not only in what she's sharing, but in the comments and discussions that emerge from her presentations. This passionate interest in movement history and teaching was the basis for our conversations and collaboration. It is also evident when Judy attends conferences; she joins in fully—listening, discussing, considering. I first saw this at the March 2006 Local Studies Conference I organized at Geneseo. Richardson was among the keynote speakers, but her participation went well beyond that and students were especially captivated by the way she moved back and forth between the roles of teacher and learner, historical actor and documentarian.

For example, when Charles Payne addressed a debate that had recently flared on a SNCC listserv about perceptions of Freedom School teachers in the 1964 Summer Project, Richardson responded with her own memories and opinions about the scholarship. She has commented since that hearing Payne's analysis—of the ways some perceptions have been privileged over others—expanded her view, allowing her to see the issue from another angle. (See chapter 10 in this volume for a transcript of Payne's talk.) Students were also intrigued to learn that Richardson was among the SNCC organizers in-

volved in the Lowndes County, Alabama, movement, the subject of Hasan Kwame Jeffries's research and conference talk. One student observed that in realizing this, he was "struck by how alive" movement history is. (He also reflected on the fact that the conference was organized, in part, around the actions taken more than forty years before by people who were then his age.)³ During the discussion following one of the first panels, Richardson mentioned "movement values." Payne referred back to that moment in his closing talk, first asking the audience to define what "movement values" meant to them and then asking Richardson to respond. (See chapter 14 in this volume for a transcript of Payne's conversation with conference participants.) Student Joseph Zurro later wrote, "[M]y heart raced a little because the way that she spoke seemed, in some ways, to be how I felt. Now, it's very easy for me to want to align my thoughts with those of a movement legend, but it's true! Judy Richardson said that for her the Movement was something that was 'very personal.' . . . What I thought I heard was that it was more about human-to-human interactions . . . and about applying all of your own good virtues each day and at all times."⁴

Another student commented that Richardson's keynote, which she used to read accounts by a number of SNCC women from an early version of *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, "infused all that we have been reading, and talking about in class, with such a vibrant, human voice that was truly a privilege to experience." After summarizing some of what she learned from the individual stories (including the importance of personal ties and the ways these women defined success in terms of their experiences and their communities), she concludes: "[B]y humanizing these true leaders of the movement, Richardson helped to further develop my understanding of just how critical local studies are."⁵ One student saw a connection between the way Richardson approached her keynote and what she had been learning in class about Ella Baker and the organizing tradition. "It was a great idea on her part to include and intertwine the many stories told by various SNCC members and other people in the movement. I think in this way, she understood that her story alone isn't the only valuable thing. . . . If you look at it in a symbolic way, you could say that she, like the movement, is not just a 'one person show,' but [it was] a group effort and the work of many people, not just one."⁶

In the interview that follows, Judy offers her view of what's important about the movement (including why interpretations matter) and reflects on what she tries to convey in her talks and workshops (including some of the themes that caught students' attention at the Local Studies Conference). We

get a sense, too, of how her years in the movement (and those “movement values”) remain central to her life. As she talks about how she approaches all of these efforts to document and share movement history—filmmaking, teaching, editing *Hands on the Freedom Plow*—we get important snapshots of the movement. We also get a sense of Judy, her passion and commitment, her perspective and insights. Like my students, I greatly enjoy hearing Judy speak. Even more, though, I value her openness and her willingness to question, to consider, to search for ways to explain and communicate. She wants people to know about the movement, not simply to relive or celebrate these experiences that were so central to her life, but because she believes knowing about the movement is crucial for today and tomorrow. For her, this is true of the high ideals *and* the nitty gritty of organizing; it includes everything from the messiness and the losses (whether personal or political) to the joy of community and the power of struggle. And while there is much we can learn from studying the movement, Judy emphasizes that, at its most basic, it teaches us that we must each take responsibility. And whether alone or with others, we must each find a way to act on what we believe.

INTERVIEW

EMILYE CROSBY (EC): I know that you do teacher development workshops and speak to college audiences and other groups, especially for King Day. What are some of the things that you try to convey to your audiences?

JUDY RICHARDSON (JR): What I’m trying to get across are some essential things. One, that it wasn’t just Dr. King. And that’s usually how I close it. That the movement is folks just like those of us in this room. It’s our cousins, our uncles, our church people, our fellow students. And if we don’t know that it’s people just like us, *just like us*, who did the movement, we won’t know that we can do it again, and then the other side wins. So, it’s primarily that. And secondly, if we do nothing, nothing changes. Now, I mentioned that to you earlier and you rightly said, “In fact, it can change and get worse,” which is true. So, if you do nothing, it either stays the same or gets worse, particularly if you are a person of color, or unempowered, or poor, or in any way disadvantaged. And I don’t mean you got to just struggle, struggle, struggle all your life. But you got to be aware that somewhere in this, you got to keep doing *something*. It can be a tutorial. ‘Cause I keep say-

ing to students, “Look, it may not be movement stuff. It may be you’re doing a tutorial, and in that tutorial you do what we used to do in the Freedom Schools. You’re not just doing reading and writing, you’re talking about, ‘Well, this is the Constitution, how would you change it to make it more equitable? How would you change it so that it works more for unempowered people?’” It’s always thinking, I’m not going to use “outside-the-box,” but thinking in a different way from the way people generally structure stuff.

Now, and the other thing I try to do is show them that it’s not this quick thing. So, even in *Eyes*, you get this sense that you’re having these protests in Selma and then in a few days you’ve got twenty thousand people marching across the Pettus Bridge in Selma. And it never happened that way. So particularly young people who are trying to organize, I will get them coming up after a speech on a campus, and they’ll say, “You know it’s only I and my two friends who come to meetings.” And, I said, “Honey, first of all, if everybody who says they were in the movement, were in the movement, we’d be free now. But the other part of that is you need to understand, we shortened the length of time it took to get things moving in *Eyes*. We speeded stuff up. It doesn’t take place in real time.”

When I was in organizing in Cordele, southwest Georgia, I’d have weekly “mass” meetings. There were maybe four people in that mass meeting for a good two, three months. It was I, my coworker from the community, and her mother. And I think her uncle might have come once or twice, but I can’t remember. The only reason I knew it was having an effect was because somewhere in there, within those, I guess two months, there was a police brutality case that had gone up, which had always been pro forma. Well, my coworker and her mother asked me to do up leaflets because I had a mimeograph machine in the office. And so I did up leaflets and they distributed them. They said you should not come to the session, to the courthouse. They distributed them, they went, they obviously organized the community, and they packed the courtroom. It had never happened before.

So, part of what I say to people, to young people, particularly, who are wondering how come it’s only the same four people in their meetings, that’s the way it was in the movement, too. But, you never know how that word is spreading and you never know when it’s going to ignite something. You never know when it’s gonna come to fruition. But again, if you do nothing, there’s nothing to come to fruition, so you got to do something. So, yeah. They have this, this imagined kind of time span where things happen

quickly. *Eyes* helps feed into that, but it is not true. So, you always have to say, "Look, the reality that you're dealing with—in that sense, anyway—is no different from what we were dealing with." But I also acknowledge that it was a very different time. I let them know that I don't think that what we're in now is the same as it was in 1960 or 1964. But, what I'm hoping they get is that there are certain movement principles and certain ways of working and organizing—certain tools that can facilitate the work that they're doing or that they might want to do—to help get them started and might sustain them and the communities they are organizing.

Movement people will sometimes say, "You young people just aren't doing diddly squat and da da da." Young folks don't need to hear that. What they need to hear is, this is how we did stuff. This is how we got started. These were the difficulties that we had. And not try to romanticize that. Now when I say romanticize, I don't mean that you don't talk about the glory of the movement, 'cause it was absolutely glorious to me. And it was a time that I felt extremely alive and, so, in some ways maybe I romanticize it too. But not to the point where you gloss over the difficulties or the failings of the movement. You want to acknowledge that as well.

Also, I always talk about the fact that we're not getting beat over the head just to sit down next to white people. That's real crucial. That we all—meaning the movement and local people even before the movement comes into a community—see it as, just, we have the same rights as every other American. So if we want to go into this lunch counter and sit wherever we want to, we should be able to do that. And voting is a factor of citizenship. So, it's mainly about being able to exercise rights as *Americans* that everybody else is exercising. And also economic equity, so I always put that in.

EC: Is there a certain point in the movement at which you begin to envision something that's actually different than the rights that people already have?

JR: Oh, interesting. Not, truthfully, not usually in the presentations I do.

EC: So, that's not something you address in the presentations. Is that something you experienced as part of the movement?

JR: Yes, certainly. Good point. As far as the movement, I think my assumption was that you were gonna have the world that we talked about in the movement. Which was that people really wouldn't . . . want. It starts to sound like I'm about to do, go into Marx or something, which I really have never understood be-



Figure 27 Judy Richardson speaking to students at SUNY Geneseo, March 2005. Photograph by Ron Pretzer, courtesy of SUNY Geneseo.

cause I don't read political tracts. But there was a sense that if you're gonna do a day's work, you're supposed to get more than a dollar a day or two dollars a day. That's the reason I talk about the economic inequity and talk about: what does it mean to have CEOs getting three hundred and four hundred times the wage of an average worker in their company? What does that mean?

EC: Some people talk about the Beloved Community. Did that mean anything to you in SNCC?

JR: There was certainly a sense that we took care of one another, that we respected one another's opinion, that you never called somebody stupid. People did argue. They argued vociferously. But there really was a fundamental respect for other people and their opinions and that was important. That's something I carried with me.

EC: One of the things you said is that when you talk to students, you want to convey something of how wonderful the movement was and important, but also, not gloss over the difficulties. Do you have examples of the difficulties?

JR: Mmmm. Yeah. One of the things is that I don't think we realized how long it was gonna take. I think that I really did believe that once we got

voting rights and got more black folks in power and got public accommodations, that it would just not be as difficult. Not that all the problems would be solved, just that it would not be as difficult. And I think it never occurred to me, for example, how getting black faces in positions of power—as somebody said, “black faces in high places,” that *really was not gonna get it*. I mean, humph, there’s Clarence Thomas, who’s probably one of the worst. Well . . . among the worst.

EC: Are there some common assumptions that you confront, from college students or teachers?

JR: There’s this idea that it’s not a whole lot of black resistance before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The civil rights movement just starts. That’s a real big thing. It starts. With Rosa Parks. Nothing happens before then.

And there is always this assumption that it’s just about integrating facilities, that the movement is just about that one thing. And it usually comes out in—“I had no idea that you all were working for economic equity.” Because I usually read from the SNCC speech at the March on Washington which talks about the difference between a maid making a dollar a day in the home of a family making \$70,000 a year. And I talk about SCLC organizing the Poor People’s Campaign. And usually there’s an anger that comes, particularly from black kids. This one black student said it publicly. Sometimes they’ll come up to me, but this one, she said it in the audience. She said, “How come I didn’t know all of this?” And they get mad, really mad. And she said, “I went to the best”—and that’s the thing. She said, “I went to the best schools. Nobody told me about this.”

Another misconception is they think it was all men. Even now. They really do think it was not only just Dr. King, but . . . just men. That’s one of the reasons I became involved in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, which is an anthology of SNCC women’s writings and oral histories, which we solicited, collected, and edited over a period of, God, over twelve years.⁷ Now when we first started it, Jean Wheeler Smith talked to me about bringing a team together, an editorial group. I will say that I think Jean was more concerned with whether there were white people on it than I was. But, I’m glad we did it that way. [laughter] So we had this group of six women as coeditors. In some ways *Hands* was an answer to *Deep in Our Hearts*, an anthology of white women’s movement stories. Because our sense was that there needed to be something that represented SNCC women and that incorporated black

women and local women, particularly southern local women. So when we first started—way back in ’95, I think, is when we sent that first solicitation out—we sent it to a list of about 100 people. And in that solicitation, we said we wanted stories that you’ve been telling your children, max thirty pages. But we only want to include those who were based in the South for a prolonged period of time. And we did that because we didn’t want to have mainly a lot of the 1964 Mississippi Summer volunteers. We wanted people who were really integral to the work that SNCC was doing, and could represent it. So we asked for these stories and then when we started getting stuff in, we realized that some folks were not gonna take the time to do this. So Faith Holsaert went down and did oral histories in southwest Georgia. Dottie did an oral history with Annie Pearl Avery. I did an interview with Gloria Richardson. And Jean Smith did the oral history with Mrs. Victoria Gray.

So one of the reasons for doing this was ‘cause I kept getting this thing with Stokely. And I got this from a scholar when I spoke at Rutgers in 2007. He was a scholar, black scholar, and he said something in introducing our panel that reflected the Stokely quote. You know, Stokely saying at Waveland, laughingly saying, “Ha, ha, ha, the best position for a woman is prone.” Now, the context for this quote is really important. This was at a point when everybody in SNCC is doing position papers. He’s being Stokely. Mary King has already said in her book, “It was a joke!” Everybody took it as a joke. And so to hear *this* from a black male scholar in 2007 was—So then Courtland Cox, who was on the panel, too, got up to present and he starts talking and then he said, “And then about that Stokely comment,” and he turns to me and pauses. And I said, “Don’t worry, I got it covered.” And everybody laughed. And I did when it was my turn to present.

But part of it with *Hands* was to say, we were not this little submissive group of women, which is how we often get framed now as SNCC women, because of Sara Evans and the so-called Stokely quote and how the white women’s movement had sometimes portrayed this.⁸ And we never felt unempowered. We never felt powerless. What comes through in these narratives is that these women—and there are fifty-two of us coming from everywhere, so it’s not like we’re just selecting and cherry-picking certain people. We *all* felt empowered, and for many of us, felt the most powerful that we have ever felt. Now, I will say, how we saw that, sometimes, was affected by whether we were white or black. Because whether we were white or black determined, sometimes, whether you went into the field, whether you were gonna endanger the

life of some black man by being there. There were a lot of reasons why white women didn't go into the field, were not sent into the field. And that's what's so wonderful about Casey Hayden's contribution to the book. She's very clear about the fact that she feels powerful throughout. And she understands why she's not supposed to go into the field, because it's gonna get some black man killed. And that she never feels that her project, her ideas, and her concepts are in any way devalued. And in fact they are very valued, so you have white women who really do see their time in SNCC as just amazing. And others who may have some problems with it. Yeah. So I guess part of it was, we wanted to hopefully end, forever, that conception of submissive little SNCC woman. No, I'm sorry. Not just submissive, oppressed. Oppressed SNCC women. Yes.

EC: Do you have a sense that women in SNCC did have less visibility—

JR: Oh gosh yes. Absolutely. Yeah. They were like, not there in the popular culture or the history. You didn't hear about Ruby Doris. I think about, in *Eyes on the Prize*. I often point out, in the Freedom Riders section, that Ruby Doris is in the paddy wagon footage. And I say to audiences, "That's Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, she was SNCC's Executive Secretary." And then afterward I explain who she is and that she did thirty days jail-no-bail in Rock Hill, S.C., and what she comes out of. So women were not seen as a presence within the SNCC history, and, yeah, we wanted the reality of that leadership to come through.

EC: What do you think are some of the most significant themes coming out of the book?

JR: Mmmm. Well, one thing is the sense of power that they had in the organization. The sense of power they felt they had, not as, necessarily, "leaders," but as activists, who were women, but who were activists within the organization. So this sense of power. I think you get also the sense of being preyed upon by white men in the communities where they grew up. And that comes out in southern black women's pieces. Certainly Bernice Johnson Reagon and Joann Christian. The role that family and community has in making them who they were and giving them the grounding to want to be part of this movement. The sense of things that had happened in their own community, like lynching. You get a history, you get a real sense of resistance in these black communities from these stories—even before the movement comes. But then what happens to some of those who re-

sist and how the community has to get them out of harm's way, and send them to Chicago or wherever. Within the white women, you also get a sense that they also feel that have found a community. Which is why, for some of them, it is so hurtful when they can no longer be part of that.

Certainly self-defense is strong. That's everywhere. That's in Annie Pearl Avery's. That's in Joann Christian's. That's throughout. To the point, I remember that when Taylor Branch was nice enough to read the initial manuscript of *Hands*. And this was several years ago, when we had done a first edit, and it was unwieldy and probably 800 pages. He read it all and was so helpful! So he called me and we had like an hour-long conversation, probably over an hour. And he was going through the pieces that he thought were better than others and said if we wanted an entrée into Simon and Schuster, his publisher, he would certainly give that entrée. But then he said to me, and he said it a couple of times, that this self-defense thing was troubling. And then, when it came to the third time, I said, "Well, you know Taylor, though, that was the reality of the movement." And he said, a little wistfully, "Well, yeah, I know, but where does that lead?" But self-defense is definitely another through line, a theme that comes out of *Hands on the Freedom Plow*.

EC: So he thought that you should downplay that in the book? Edit it out?

JR: He never said that. See, that's what's interesting. He just said it was unfortunate. "It's unfortunate."

EC: And can you say a little bit more about your understanding of why he thought it was unfortunate?

JR: Because he's very much philosophically nonviolent, that's where his heart is. He loves the Nashville movement. He loves Beloved Community. He loves philosophical nonviolence. He's a nice guy and he's just personally uncomfortable with this whole idea of self-defense, and the only problem with that is that therefore, he does not include that very important piece of the movement in his narrative. And so people really do get a sense from his books that everybody is, during the "good movement" before '66, that they are philosophically nonviolent. And so it really misinterprets the movement in that way.

Prathia Hall has a wonderful piece about nonviolence in *Hands*, as a matter-of-fact. Prathia was very religious. Her mother and father had a church in Philadelphia. Prathia, before she died, had taken the Martin

Luther King Chair in the School of Religion at Boston University. And Prathia, in her piece in *Hands*, talks about being in this meeting during the Selma March that had a lot of SCLC people in it. And she said the whole issue of nonviolence came up, because folks were talking—after the horror of “Bloody Sunday”—about, “We want to go get some guns.” And she said, she got so mad, because the SCLC people, she said, really did a kind of, not hijacking. It was manipulation. What SCLC folks said was, “If you can’t be non-violent, you can’t be part of the movement.” And she found that so horrible, even though she was philosophically nonviolent. But she said, “How can you say to somebody, after what has just happened, that you are not worthy of the movement if you can’t espouse philosophical nonviolence?” And she just found that so abhorrent. And so she put that in her piece in *Hands*.⁹

EC: What are some of the other things you think are important about the movement that you emphasize—

JR: Sometimes in my talks I mention the time, in Winona, Mississippi, in 1963, where Fannie Lou Hamer, Annette Ponder, and several other civil rights workers are arrested and beaten in jail. I talk about how Annette is beaten bloody and how the jailor wants to be called “sir” and she won’t say “sir.” When Annette comes out, the people who’ve come to get her out of jail look at her bloated face from the beating and somebody says, “Annette, are you okay?” And when I first get to the Atlanta office, at some point, I see this photo of her face all beaten up. So, the folks getting her out of jail say, “Are you okay?” And she says, “Freedom!” When Nelson Mandela gets out of prison I think about these four people. There’s no comparison—Mandela twenty-four years on Robbin Island and these four—plus Larry Guyot who gets arrested the next day when he goes to try to get them out—in a Winona jail. But what has happened is that if you continue to resist oppression, you sometimes become stronger than those who seek to oppress you. And that is what was similar in both of those cases.

So, I usually will talk about that and then I end usually with a quote from Melba Patilla, one of the Little Rock Nine. She mentions, in the first series of *Eyes on the Prize*: “There are times when I wondered if I was human.” She talks about how they turned the water to scalding in the girls’ locker room and stuff like that. And she says, “Sometimes I wondered, am I, am I less than human? And what’s wrong with me?” ‘Cause she’s calling it back onto herself as a child. And then she just decides she’s got to mellow out and she’s got to

find the strength in herself. And that survival is day-to-day and she finds the endurance and the strength to survive even the horrendous trials that they put her through in Little Rock. That is always, no matter where I am, no matter how short the speech has to be, that is always my last quote. Because it is how you survive oppression, both individually and as a community.

In the teacher workshops—the professional development sessions—I used to show teachers a lot of *Eyes* I. I now go into *Eyes* II, as well, which is much more relevant in terms of what we’re dealing with today. I like to show “The Promised Land,” which has Dr. King and the movement opposing the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, it doesn’t have the part of his famous Riverside Church speech that I most like where he says that those who question why he’s come out against the war not only really don’t know him or his calling, they don’t know the world in which *they* live. But at least the episode includes footage from that speech and how he’s dealing with the Vietnam protest and the fact that other black leaders are coming out against him, like the NAACP and Roy Wilkins and Jackie Robinson and Senator Edward Brookes. I mean really acting as if he had no right to talk about what is then seen as international affairs and it’s good ‘cause Andy Young comes in and says, “It was almost like, ‘Nigger stay in your place.’” And so I now show that segment, almost that full hour, because it also gets into the economic inequity part and what SCLC is doing in terms of Poor People’s Campaign.¹⁰ Now, I was surprised to find myself focusing on King because I had always been against this King-centered thing, but I find that it’s helpful to show somebody like King in some ways becoming fairly radicalized; certainly he’s moving even farther left in terms of his politics. And for the first time he is willing to oppose the Johnson administration where he wouldn’t before. And coming out very, very strongly against the Vietnam War and that it meant something when he came out. And I combine that with the *Eyes* II segment on the assassination of Chicago Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, which relates to contemporary police brutality and the use of state power to silence dissent.

I always talk in my speeches, not just about the movement and its history and its values and the many people who made up the movement that I knew, but, I used to also talk about affirmative action: why that was important, what affirmative action for white people had always been like. And I always talk about growing economic inequity. And comparing it with other countries. And I always use statistical information, as I had learned to do in

SNCC, particularly from Jack Minnis, who was our director of research; you don't just spout off at the mouth. You ground your argument in facts and stats. So, I knew all of that and I had always used those other two things, affirmative action and economic inequality, which could be difficult to talk about to an audience. And they might get riled up and stuff, but, the bottom line of my speech, the core of it, was always the movement stuff, which made people feel good. But after 9/11, with these idiots in the White House, then it became, I've got to say something about the war, the soon-to-be war. And how do you let people know this is ridiculous, right? And unnecessary. Okay. So, I'm trying to figure out how you frame, to these kind of audiences, what they don't want to hear.

For example, I got a call to speak at the 2005 King breakfast for the NSA, the National Security Administration, as in the folks who are illegally wire-tapping us. The first thing I thought was: do they not know what I talk about? And then I started thinking about how I would have to change the speech, because this was the NSA. And I knew I was going into what we used to call "the Belly of the Beast." And it was like—I really like people to like me when I'm speaking. And that's the thing. I like them to like me so they'll be able to hear what I'm saying. It may be difficult for them to hear some stuff, but at least they'll be open to most of it.

So after 9/11, I'm trying to figure out how you frame opposition to the Bush war—even before they dropped the bombs—but again, because of the movement, my assumption is *I've got to say it*. When the war is imminent and after it begins, I don't enjoy the speaking anymore and that's the problem. There was a whole period of about three years that I was on the road and not looking forward to the speeches. Before it had been primarily about the movement and I love talking about the movement because it reminds me about the wonderfulness of it. And so I love talking about it. And now, with Bush and the idiots, I no longer enjoy it. It's now more, "You really got to do this—you got to give folks proof that this war makes no sense." And I have to think about how I'm gonna steel myself and what documents I need to help me. So I'm clipping more of the *New York Times* and other mainstream press.

So I have to go into the NSA and I'm not sure how they're gonna receive me. Whereas they would have been more-or-less okay with affirmative action and talking about growing economic inequity, I'm now talking about war. And I'm opposing the Bush administration's unnecessary war, because that's how I frame it. So I remember talking to the woman who called me.

John Lewis had spoken there two days before me. And I say to the young woman, "So did John say anything about the war?" And she said, "No, but we loved him. He was so wonderful and he talked about the Selma March and—" Okay. So, I said, "But he didn't say anything about the war?" And she said, "Nooo, but—"

So, we're talking and I say, "Well, you know, I talk about Montgomery and who really was the foundation of the Montgomery movement," and I go through some stuff on the speech and then I said, "Now, I also talk about economic inequity." And, she said, "Oh, fine, okay." And I said, "And, I also, though, talk about the war." And there was this beat and she said, "Oh, you're gettin' sticky, now." Then she said, "Well, as long as you reference Dr. King because this is the annual King Day breakfast." And what her comment does is it turns me around in terms of how I can frame this for them. Now, I had always talked about King and SCLC and the Poor People's Campaign, and that would get me to economic injustice. But, what I now realize is that I can just say, "Well, he's also talking about opposition to the war." And then, because of her, I think, let me look at the Riverside speech that he gives in April of 1967, the year before he's killed. And it's a wonderful speech.

Now, it was wonderful, actually, that she said this because I reframed the way that I entered the documents—I usually use documents because my sense is nobody's going to believe me, Judy Richardson. It shouldn't just be your opinion, which is what I learned from the movement. And in terms of talking about the Iraq War, I started using the stuff that I thought they would hear. So I was using the Army War College Report. I use four-star Marine Corps Major Anthony Zinni, former head of Central Command. So, it was all that stuff that I figured, they can hear this. But because of this woman at NSA, I entered it through Dr. King's "Riverside speech."

Now, when I got to the event, I'm coming into *the* NSA, so I go through many check points, to the point that I can't even bring my cell phone inside. The deputy director meets me. He shows me a map on the wall that's an aerial map of this NSA compound. And then he shows me where things were before they tore them down after 9/11. What he's telling me is: This is how we had to secure the perimeter. And, more and more, I'm beginning to delete sections in the speech in my mind. I'm beginning to think, "Okay, this is not the place to say some of this, Richardson, 'cause . . ." and I rationalize it. Because, I say, "If you say this about the war, then they won't hear this about economic injustice. Or, they won't hear this about affirmative ac-

tion." You rationalize in a way that will make you feel better about not doing what you know you should.

So, then I get into the breakfast and I'm sitting with the deputy director and the minister who's doing the invocation for the breakfast. In his prayer, he asks us to pray for "the brave men and women who are over there," but he doesn't stop there. He says, "Who are fighting for our liberty and our freedom in Iraq?" And I start deleting more parts of the speech, like, unh uh. And then I don't know what happened. I'm not sure at what point I decide I'm just going to go ahead and say it. That I, that I have to say it. *That there is a responsibility to talk about this in this place. And that sense of responsibility comes from SNCC. It comes from nowhere else. It's like you cannot, you cannot be here and not do this.* So I get up there and I see these people and it's like, "Go for it." I did it. I did the speech that I had planned to do. What surprises me is that they give me a standing ovation. I am so surprised because I truly believed that some of these people were gonna walk out on the speech and that always breaks you. It breaks your rhythm and I'm just not confident enough that I'm going to be able to ignore that kind of thing totally. And, again, you really do want people to hear what you're saying. So they didn't walk out. They give me a standing ovation. And as I come off the stage, the minister shakes my hand. There is a line of, I would say, about fifteen people, to say something to me.

The first woman is this older white woman who says to me, "I am so glad you said what so many of us are thinking, but are afraid to say." And I actually hugged her and told her, "I was so worried about saying this." And I said—and this was true—"I have been worried about this for the last two months, since I knew I was gonna do this." Then there's a black woman behind her. And they all speak very softly, by the way. And she says, "You know, I used to want my daughter to work here, but I have not wanted that in some years." And then another woman, who comes up to me, who is also black, and she says, "I'm a senior staff person here." And she says, "We all know that this war should not have happened." She said, and she's real clear. She says, "And I'm not just saying, it's being done badly, I'm saying it should never have been waged." And it's like, why would I not have assumed that these people, who are sitting in the middle of this, would not know this. But also, I was amazed that they would acknowledge that.

And then there were a couple of guys, too, who came up, but they didn't say that kind of thing. They just thanked me for my speech and glad you

came. Okay. But that there were so many people—oh, and one woman who was clearly not senior staff, black woman, tall black woman, who said, "I'm not going to speak too loudly," because she said, "I don't want any problems with my job." But she said, "I'm very happy that you were here." And then, matter-of-fact, she was the one who then said, "Now, don't expect to be invited back again." [laughter] It was so cute. That's right. I had forgotten that.

So at the end it was a relief. It was like, *okay*. First of all, I'm through this thing that has so worried me for the last two months. But, it was also that I didn't knuckle under. I didn't let myself get intimidated and I didn't self-censor. For me, that was that moment where it was like: Okay, are you gonna, are you gonna do this thing which you know you're supposed to do, even though it's gonna be hard, or are you gonna do the nice speech? 'Cause my speech is in segments, so I can really kind of cut to just the movement stuff—the past—if I want to. And I was really glad that I hadn't. I did what I thought the movement would expect of me. That was really what it was. This was the expectation. But that is part of what the movement does, I think, for all of us. Which is: there are things you are supposed to do.

It's why Dottie Zellner, I think, is in Jews Say No and continues to fight for human rights for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. And she talks at synagogues and helps organize demonstrations where she is somewhat threatened. Not somewhat, she is threatened physically. And she continues to talk about it, because for her, this is what SNCC said to do. "Go into your community and try to right the wrongs there." Now, this is not an easy thing. But she carries that very seriously within her. It's also why Jean Smith, who is a psychiatrist, has focused on working with at-risk youth, particularly young people of color.

It's what Betty Garman does in her continuing to organize, do community organizing, which she loves. I, myself, could not handle it at this point. Because I can't stand all the internecine stuff. I don't have the stomach for it; I don't have the patience for it, either one. She has the patience and she's willing to struggle to get people empowered, both individually and as a community. And so she's willing . . . and loves it, loves working with community groups to get them moving even at a slow pace. She just has incredible patience and real insight in terms of what can work in order to move people from point A to point B. And to connect them with other communities.

For most of us who came out of the movement, there was a sense that we were responsible for leading our lives a certain way, didn't mean we

couldn't have fun, didn't mean we couldn't dance and laugh and sing and do all that stuff. And rest sometimes. But it did mean that, overall, you had a responsibility to change stuff. Maybe little ways, maybe bigger ways. But you couldn't just sit by and let stuff happen without doing something. So I felt with that speech, I had, I had not shirked my responsibility. Yeah. That's more the way I would say it.

Note: For a discussion of Richardson's involvement in the making of *Eyes on the Prize*, see "Making *Eyes on the Prize*: An Interview with Filmmaker and SNCC Staffer Judy Richardson," chapter 9, this volume.

NOTES

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9. Prathia Hall, "Bloody Sunday," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 471–72.
10. Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize. America's Civil Rights Movement*, vol. 5: *Power! (1966–68). The Promised Land (1967–1968)* (Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, DVD edition, 2006).

JEANNE THEOHARIS

Accidental Matriarchs and Beautiful Helpmates

Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and the Memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement

On October 24, 2005, after nearly seventy years of activism, Rosa Parks died in her home in Detroit. Deserving a memorial to honor her lifetime of courageous service, what largely unfolded was a spectacle of national redemption to commemorate her death. Within days of her death, Rep. John Conyers Jr., who had employed Parks for twenty years in his Detroit office, introduced a resolution to honor Parks by having her body lie in state. After years of partisan rancor over the social justice issues most pressing to Parks and the shame of the federal government's negligence two months earlier during Hurricane Katrina, Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle rushed to hold a national funeral for the "mother of the civil rights movement."

The first woman to lie in state at the nation's capitol (and the thirty-first person overall since 1852), Parks, who died in Detroit, was first flown to Montgomery for a public viewing and memorial service.¹ Secretary of State

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