

## Chapter Seven

# MISSISSIPPI: OPENING THE CLOSED SOCIETY

You know, it may sound funny, but I love the South. I don't choose to live anywhere else. There's land here, where a man can raise coffee, and I'm going to do that some day. There are lakes where a man can sink a hook and fight for bass. . . . There is room here for my children to play and grow, and become good citizens—if the white man will let them. . . . I'll be damned . . . if I'm going to let the white man beat me. There's something out here that I've got to do for my kids, and I'm not going to stop until I've done it.

—Medgar Evers, “Why I Live in Mississippi”

*In August 1955, the summer after the Brown decision, Emmett Till, of Chicago, age fourteen, traveled to Money, Mississippi, to visit with his mother's family. Shortly after he arrived, Till and his cousins went to the town drugstore and bought some candy. On his way out of the store, Emmett allegedly yelled out to the female storekeeper: “Bye baby.” Later that night, the storekeeper's husband, Roy Bryant and his buddy, J. W. Milam, knocked on the door of Mose Wright, Till's great uncle and asked for the boy. They proceeded to drag Emmett out of the house, interrogated, beat, and then shot him in the skull from point-blank range. Then they dumped his corpse into the Tallahatchie River.*

*Till's murder outraged black America. Jet magazine published a graphic photograph of his mutilated body. His mother had insisted on an open casket funeral service so that “the whole world could see what they've done.” Protests took place and the NAACP kept the case in the limelight to generate support for*

the fight against segregation. Bryant and Milam were arrested and brought to trial for murder. At the end of the trial, Bryant's and Milam's defense attorney declared to the jury: "I am sure that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you will have the courage to free these men." Within an hour they did, ignoring virtually all the evidence, as had whites in countless other murders or lynchings of blacks. In a paid interview with William Bradford Huie, Bryant and Milam admitted that they had killed Till in cold blood. As Milam recalled: "I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place."

7.1 In the following excerpt from her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody, who grew up near Money, describes the impact that Till's murder had on her. The piece hints at the origins of the movement in Mississippi. While Milam hoped to keep blacks "in their place," the murder had the exact opposite impact on Moody. She became convinced that she had to fight to crack the social and legal barriers that had been imposed on blacks by whites in Mississippi for centuries. With the help of a basketball scholarship Moody went away to college, ending up at Tougaloo State, the black university in Jackson, Mississippi. There she befriended several civil rights activists and worked with Medgar Evers, CORE, and SNCC in the local freedom fight. Her autobiography remains one of the best firsthand accounts of the movement.

**7.1 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 121-138.**

Not only did I enter high school with a new name, but also with a completely new insight into the life of Negroes in Mississippi. I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmett Till was killed.

Up until his death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. "Just like them lowdown skunks killed him they will do the same to us," Mama had said. When I asked her who killed the man and why, she said, "An Evil Spirit killed him. You gotta be a good girl or it will kill you too." So since I was seven, I had lived in fear of that "Evil Spirit." It took me eight years to learn what that spirit was. . . .

That evening when I stopped off at the house on the way to Mrs. Burke's, Mama was singing. . . . I wondered if she knew about Emmett Till. The way she was singing she had something on her mind and it wasn't pleasant either. . . . "Mama, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old Negro boy who was killed a little over a week ago by some white men?" I asked her.

"Where did you hear that?" she said angrily. "Boy, everybody really thinks I am dumb or deaf or something. I heard Eddie them talking about it this evening coming from school." "Eddie them better watch how they go around here talking. These white folks git hold of it they gonna be in trouble," she said. "What are they gonna be in trouble about, Mama? People got a right to talk, ain't they?" "You go on to work before you is late. And don't you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed before Miss Burke them. . . . That boy's a lot better off in heaven than he is here," she continued. . . .

On my way to Mrs. Burke's that evening, Mama's words kept running through my mind. "Just do your work like you don't know nothing." "Why is Mama acting so scared?" I thought. "And what if Mrs. Burke knew we knew? Why must I pretend I don't know? Why are these people killing Negroes? What did Emmett Till do besides whistle at that white woman?"

By the time I got to work, I had worked my nerves up some. I was shaking as I walked on the porch. "Do your work like you don't know nothing." But once I got inside, I couldn't have acted normal if Mrs. Burke were paying me to be myself.

I was so nervous, I spent most of the evening avoiding them going about the house dusting and sweeping. . . . I went to the bathroom to clean the tub. . . . I spent a whole hour scrubbing it. I had removed the stains in no time but I kept scrubbing until they had finished dinner.

When they had finished and gone into the living room. . . . Mrs. Burke called me to eat. I took a clean plate out of the cabinet and sat down. Just as I was putting the first forkful of food in my mouth, Mrs. Burke entered the kitchen. "Essie, did you hear about the fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood?" . . . "No, I didn't hear that," I answered, almost choking on the food. "Do you know why he was killed?" she asked and I didn't answer. "He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys' heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble," she said passionately.

"How old are you, Essie?" she asked. . . . "Fourteen. I will soon be fifteen though," I said. "See, that boy was just fourteen too. It's a shame he had to die so soon." She was so red in the face, she looked as if she was on fire.

When she left the kitchen I sat there with my mouth open and my food untouched. I couldn't have eaten now if I were starving. . . . I went

home shaking like a leaf on a tree. For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me and had given up. But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me.

Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I was a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought. . . .

*7.2, 7.3, and 7.4 As Robert Moses and other activists in McComb discovered, most white Mississippians displayed a fierce commitment to white supremacy. The White Citizens Council came to dominate state politics. In 1960, Ross Barnett, a damage-suit lawyer, who had twice failed miserably to become governor, was elected to the top post in the state by promising to resist integration. Two years after he was elected, Barnett made good on his promise, defying court orders to allow James Meredith to enroll at the University of Mississippi. In the same time period, the number of registered black voters actually declined. As of 1962, in five counties with black majorities, not a single black was registered to vote. Without a doubt, physical intimidation was one of the main reasons for this. The following affidavits—taken from E. W. Steptoe, a brave ally of SNCC; Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers' successor as head of the state chapter of the NAACP; and June Johnson, one of many homespun Mississippi freedom fighters—demonstrate that activism had its costs. These affidavits, along with countless others, were collected by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and published as the Mississippi Black Paper (Random House, 1965).*

### 7.2 E. W. Steptoe, "Affidavit."

In 1954 I organized the Amite County Chapter of the NAACP. We held several meetings in a school building. . . . One night . . . the sheriff, Ira Jenkins, his deputy, and a member of the school board, and 15 or 20 other white men came out and surrounded the building. Then the sheriff, deputy, and school board member came into the meeting. This was about 8 P.M. These three did not take off their hats or anything; they just sat down. Then the school board member turned to different people and asked them what they were doing at the meeting. They didn't answer him. Then he said: "My advice to you is to take this money and put it into the

school building." He apparently thought the group was collecting some money, though this was not the case. When they were ready to leave, the sheriff without asking reached on the table and took the secretary's book. Then they left the building and drove off. Because of their presence, the people were frightened and the meeting ended.

Ever since that time, whenever we have held meetings, the sheriff or his deputy drives around. . . . It is hard to get people to come to the meetings because they are so afraid. . . .

I live far off the highway, and the white people never come out to threaten me at my house. But in September, 1963, a cross was burned where the road to my house leads off from the highway. . . . It is extremely dangerous for anyone to work for civil rights there [Amite Co.] without protection from outside the county. . . . I feel that my life is in danger. . . . I have felt this since I began working for the NAACP in 1954. . . .

### 7.3 Aaron Henry, "Affidavit."

I am a Negro and reside in Clarksdale, Mississippi. . . . I have had my life threatened by telephone, by carrier of word, and other means. . . .

On Good Friday of 1962, while sleeping in the dead of night, our home was bombed and set afire. In the house at that time besides my wife and daughter was Congressman Charles Diggs of the State of Michigan. . . . The fact that he was staying with me had been circulated in the local paper, the Clarksdale *Press Register*, the day before. Immediately following that the house was fired upon with several slugs sticking in the walls. Three months after that, the Fourth Street Drug Store, my place of business, was bombed. The plate glass windows in the front of the store have been repeatedly broken out in the past few years. As a result of these attacks, all of the insurance we have carried on the store and on our home has been canceled. . . .

### 7.4 June Johnson, "Affidavit."

I am 16 years old and live in Greenwood, Mississippi. A group of civil rights workers was travelling from Charleston, South Carolina, to Greenwood, Miss., by bus on June 9, 1963. The group consisted of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Miss Annell Ponder, Mr. James West, Miss Euvester Simpson, Miss Rosemary Freeman, and myself. On the trip from Columbus, Miss., to Winona, Miss., our group sat in the front of the bus and occasionally sang freedom songs.

When we got to Winona, the bus stopped at the terminal there. Everybody went into the terminal except Mrs. Hamer. When we got inside the

terminal, our group sat down on the "white" side. [A] Winona [police officer] came in and told us to "get over where you belong." We got up and went outside the terminal. Soon the [police officer] and a state trooper came outside and arrested us. When she saw us getting into the trooper's car, Mrs. Hamer got out of the bus and asked us, "Should I go on to Greenwood?" We told her to go ahead, but the trooper called out, "Get that woman," and an unidentified white man grabbed her and put her in his car. The trooper took us to the Montgomery County Jail. Mrs. Hamer arrived in the other car about the same time.

We were taken inside. The trooper said, "What you niggers come down here for—a damn demonstration?" We all shook our heads and answered "No." Then he said, "You damn niggers don't say 'No' to me—you say 'Yes, sir.'" While he was saying this, Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ and the Winona [police officer] came in, accompanied by the same white man that brought Mrs. Hamer in.

Officer A\_\_\_\_\_ walked over and stamped James West's toe and hit Euvester in the side with a ring of heavy keys. Then the trooper questioned us. While questioning Annell Ponder, he found out that she lived in Atlanta, Ga. He told her, "I knew you wasn't from Mississippi 'cause you don't know how to say 'Yes, sir' to a white man." Then he turned to the rest of us and said, "I been hearing about you black sons-of-bitches over in Greenwood raising all that hell. You come over here to Winona, you'll get the hell whipped out of you."

He opened the door to the cell block and told everybody to get inside. I started to go in with the rest of them and he said, "Not you, you black-assed nigger." He asked me, "Are you a member of the NAACP?" I said yes. Then he hit me on the cheek and chin. I raised my arm to protect my face and he hit me in the stomach. He asked, "Who runs that thing?" I answered, "The people." He asked, "Who pays you?" I said, "Nobody." He said, "Nigger, you're lying. You done enough already to get your neck broken." Then the four of them . . . brought Mrs. Hamer in—threw me on the floor and beat me. After they finished stomping me, they said, "Get up, nigger." I raised my head and the white man hit me on the back of the head with a club wrapped in black leather. Then they made me get up. My dress was torn off and my slip was coming off. Blood was streaming down the back of my head and my dress was all bloody. They put me in a cell with Rosemary Freeman, and called Annell Ponder. I couldn't see what they did to Annell, but I could hear them trying to make her say "Yes, sir." When they brought her back, she was bloody and her clothes were torn. . . . A little while later we heard Mrs.

Hamer hollering, "Don't beat me no more. . . ." Later they brought her back to her cell crying. She cried at intervals during the night, saying that the leg afflicted with polio was hurting her terribly.

We stayed in that jail cell day and night from Sunday till Tuesday, when they booked us and informed us that we were charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. We then went back to jail until Wednesday afternoon, when a group of SNCC people came from Greenwood to get us out of jail. We got back to Greenwood about 7 P.M. on June 12, 1963.

*7.5 In early 1964, SNCC decided to undertake a major campaign which became known as Mississippi or Freedom Summer. Working with CORE, the NAACP, and SCLC, under the umbrella of COFO, SNCC brought hundreds of volunteers to Mississippi to test the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, to register blacks to vote, and to extend its activities in the state. SNCC decided to go forward with Freedom Summer only after careful deliberation. Some SNCC veterans warned that bringing masses of volunteers to the state, including a large number of whites, would undermine the objective of building up a grass-roots movement. But Robert Moses, James Forman, and several others countered that the advantages of such an endeavor outweighed the disadvantages. One potential advantage was that if a white person was killed, the nation could be expected to react. Whereas when blacks had been killed, it had not. That might sound cold, remarked CORE's David Dennis, "but that was also speaking the language of the country" (quoted in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, p. 274).*

*Before embarking on their mission, the volunteers gathered in Oxford, Ohio, for intensive training in nonviolence. Robert Moses, James Forman, and other SNCC leaders were the teachers. While in Oxford, the volunteers learned about the disappearance of Michael Schwerner, a CORE veteran, James Chaney, a native of Mississippi, and Andrew Goodman, one of the new recruits. From the moment that the three did not report their whereabouts, SNCC worried that they had been killed. Mississippi authorities scoffed at this. President Johnson decided to undertake a massive manhunt for them, mobilizing 150 FBI investigators and 200 Navy men. On August 4, the bodies of the three activists were uncovered in an earthfill dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi. An autopsy revealed that they had all been dead when buried and that they had been killed on or around the date of their initial disappearance.*

**7.5 Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Viking, 1965), pp. 15-21.**

Then Bob Moses, the Director of the Summer Project, came to the front of the floor. He didn't introduce himself, but somehow one knew

who he was. Everyone had heard a little—that he was twenty-nine, began in Harlem, had a Master's degree in philosophy from Harvard, and that he had given up teaching in New York to go South after the sit-ins. He had been in Mississippi for three years, and he wore its uniform: a T-shirt and denim overalls, in the bib of which he propped his hands. He began as though in the middle of a thought. "When Mrs. Hamer sang, 'If you miss me from the freedom fight, you can't find me nowhere; Come on over to the graveyard, I'll be buried over there . . .' that's true."

Moving up to the stage, he drew a map of Mississippi on a blackboard and patiently, from the beginning, outlined the state's areas and attitudes. The top left segment became the Delta; industry was cotton; power in the Citizens' Councils. . . . The segment beneath the Delta was the hill country, mostly poor white farmers who had been organizing since the March on Washington. Amite County, McComb: Klan territory, where violence was indiscriminately aimed at "keeping the nigger in his place" and no one was safe. Five Negroes had been murdered there since December. No indictments.

Mississippi gained texture and dimension. . . . "When you come South, you bring with you the concern of the country—because the people of the country don't identify with Negroes. The guerrilla war in Mississippi is not much different from that in Vietnam. But when we tried to see President Johnson, his secretary said that Vietnam was popping up all over his calendar and he hadn't time to talk to us. Now," he said, "because of the Summer Project, because whites were involved, a crack team of FBI men was going down to Mississippi to investigate. We have been asking them for three years. Now the federal government is concerned; there will be more protection for us, and hopefully for the Negroes who live there." . . .

"Our goals are limited. If we can go and come back alive, then that is something. If you can go into Negro homes and just sit and talk, that will be a huge job. We're not thinking of integrating the lunch counters. The Negroes in Mississippi haven't the money to eat in those places anyway. . . ."

"Mississippi has been called 'The Closed Society.' It is closed, locked. We think the key is in the vote. Any change, and possibility for dissidence and opposition, depends first on a political breakthrough." . . .

There was an interruption then at the side entrance: three or four staff members had come in and were whispering agitatedly. . . . Time passed. When [Moses] stood and spoke, he was somewhere else; it was simply that he was obliged to say something, but his voice was automatic. "Yes-

terday morning, three of our people left Meridian, Mississippi, to investigate a church-burning in Neshoba County. They haven't come back, and we haven't had any word from them. We spoke to John Doar in the Justice Department. He promised to order the FBI to act, but the local FBI still says they have been given no authority." . . .

Then a thin girl in shorts was talking to us from the stage: Rita Schwerner, the wife of one of the three.

She paced as she spoke, her eyes distraught and her face quite white, but in a voice that was even and disciplined. It was suddenly clear that she, Moses, and others on the staff had been up all the night before. The three men had been arrested for speeding. Deputy Sheriff Price of Neshoba claimed to have released them at 10 P.M. the same day. All the jails in the area had been checked, with no results. The Jackson FBI office kept saying they were not sure a federal statute had been violated.

Rita asked us to form groups by home area and wire our congressmen that the federal government, though begged to investigate, had refused to act, and that if the government did not act, none of us was safe. Someone in the audience asked her to spell the names. . . .

No one was willing to believe that the event involved more than a disappearance. It was hard to believe even that. Somehow it seemed only a climatic object lesson, part of the morning's lesson, an anecdote to give life to the words of Bob Moses. To think of it in other terms was to be forced to identify with the three, to be prepared, irrevocably, to give one's life.

The volunteers broke up into their specialized units. . . . Each day began with an announcement like Vincent Harding's on Tuesday: "There has been no word of the three people in Neshoba. The staff met all night. When we sing 'We are not afraid,' we mean we are afraid. We sing 'Ain't gonna let my fear turn me round,' because many of you might want to turn around now." . . .

The lectures and classes continued. . . . Tuesday night. Bob Moses came in quietly, turned on the microphone and said, "The car has been found outside Philadelphia [Miss.]. It was badly burned. There is no news of the three boys." . . .

The President sent two hundred sailors to search for the missing boys. Rita Schwerner and all the staff members who could be spared were in Meridian and Philadelphia. Nothing visible was being done by the authorities to prevent the same thing from happening to anyone else. We clung to the television set. . . .

Then Moses, said, "The kids are dead."

He paused—quite without regard for dramatic effect. But long enough for it to hit us: this was the first time it had been spoken: they are dead. Up to now they had simply “disappeared.” . . .

“There may be more deaths.” He waited, seeking the words he needed. “I justify myself because I’m taking risks myself, and I’m not asking people to do things I’m not willing to do. And the other thing is, people were being killed already, the Negroes of Mississippi, and I feel, anyway, responsible for their deaths. Herbert Lee killed, Louis Allen killed, five others killed this year. In some way you have to come to grips with that. . . . If you are going to do anything about it, other people are going to be killed. No privileged group in history has ever given up anything, without some kind of blood sacrifice.” . . .

“The way some people characterize this project is that it is an attempt to get some people killed so the federal government will move into Mississippi. And the way some of us feel about it is that in our country we have some real evil, and the attempt to do something about it involves enormous effort . . . and therefore tremendous risks. If for any reason you’re hesitant about what you’re getting into, it’s better for you to leave. Because what has got to be done has to be done in a certain way, or otherwise it won’t get done. You have to break off a little chunk of a problem and work on it, and try to see where it leads, and concentrate on it.” . . .

He finished, stood there, then walked out the door. The silence which followed him was absolute. It lasted a minute, two; no one moved. They know, now, what could not be applauded. Suddenly, a beautiful voice from the back of the room pierced the quiet.

They say that freedom is a constant struggle.  
They say that freedom is a constant struggle.  
They say that freedom is a constant struggle,  
Oh, Lord, we’ve struggled so long,  
We must be free, we must be free.

It was a new song to me and the others. But I knew it, and all the voices in the room joined as though the song came from the deepest part of themselves, and they had always known it.

*7.6 Freedom Summer had two main foci, (1) the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party or MFDP and (2) the Freedom Schools. The MFDP was built on the Freedom Vote of 1963, an effort organized by SNCC and independent activist Allard Lowenstein, whereby blacks voted for a slate of candidates in a mock*

*election. Like the Freedom Vote, COFO figured that the MFDP could be used as a means to register blacks, increase their political acumen, and build for the future. The fact that tens of thousands of blacks risked economic and physical threats to vote for MFDP suggests that the strategy worked very well.*

*In addition, COFO determined to challenge the Regular Democratic Party of the state at the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. A slate of delegates headed by Aaron Henry went before the credentials committee of the party to argue that they were the only legitimate Democratic Party in the state. Joe Rauh, a liberal lawyer, counsel of the UAW, and head of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), wrote a brief in MFDP’s favor, introduced its members to leading Democrats and presented its case before the credentials committee. MFDP’s challenge climaxed with the testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper and one of the most respected civil rights activists in the movement. Her testimony is reproduced below.*

#### **7.6 “Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer Before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention,” August 22, 1964, Atlantic City, New Jersey.**

Mr. Chairman, and the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis.

It was the 31st of August in 1962 that 18 of us traveled 26 miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to try to become first-class citizens. We was met in Indianola by Mississippi men, Highway Patrolmen and they allowed two of us in to take the literacy test at the time. After we had taken the test and started back to Ruleville, we was held up by the City Police and the State Highway Patrolmen and carried back to Indianola where the bus driver was charged that day with driving a bus the wrong color.

After we paid the fine among us, we continued on to Ruleville, and Reverend Jeff Sunny carried me the four miles in the rural area where I had worked as a time-keeper and sharecropper for 18 years. I was met there by my children, who told me the plantation owner was angry because I had gone down to try to register.

After they told me, my husband came, and said the plantation owner was raising Cain because I had tried to register and before he quit talking the plantation owner came, and said, “Fannie Lou, do you know—did Pap tell you what I said?” And I said, “Yes sir.” He said, “I mean that . . . If you don’t go down and withdraw . . . well—you might have to go because we are not ready for that.” . . .



And I addressed him and told him and said, "I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself."

I had to leave that same night.

On the 10th of September, 1962, 16 bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in.

And in June, the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop, was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailways bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom. . . . I stepped off the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that four workers was in and said, "Get that one there," and when I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

I was carried to the county jail and put in the holding room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Euvester Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams. I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams, and I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, yes, sir, nigger?" "Can you say yes, sir?"

And they would say horrible names. She would say, "Yes, I can say yes, sir." . . . They beat her, I don't know how long, and after a while she began to pray and asked God to have Mercy on those people. And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolmen and he asked me where I was from, and I told him Ruleville; he said, "We are going to check this."

And they left my cell and it wasn't too long before they came back. He said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word, he said, "We are going to beat you until you wish you was dead."

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack. The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolmen, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face, and I laid on my face.

The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted, and I was holding my hands behind at this time on my left side because I suffered polio when I was six years old. After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted the state Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack. The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro who had beat to set on my feet to keep me from

working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

One white man—my dress had worked up high, he walked over and pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back, back up. . . .

All of this on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?

*7.7 Worried about the damage that the MFDP challenge would do to his re-election bid, President Johnson moved quickly to squelch it. He stripped Hamer of her televised audience by scheduling an emergency press statement. Afterward, working through Hubert Humphrey, the presumed vice-presidential nominee, and the longtime darling of liberals, Johnson demanded that MFDP accept a compromise of two at-large delegates and promises of reform for future conventions. Though it had come a long way, MFDP refused to accept LBJ's offer. As James Forman observed, MFDP refused to sell out those who had worked so hard and risked so much for so little in return.*

**7.7 James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1985), pp. 386-396.**

At the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City Hubert Humphrey, Walter Reuther, Senator Wayne Morse, Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Allard Lowenstein and many other forces in the liberal-labor syndrome said that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee did not understand politics.

We did not understand the political process, they said. We did not know how to "compromise." . . . We did not understand the Democratic Party." . . .

We in SNCC understood politics and political process. We could compromise—but not sell out the people. And we knew a great deal about the Democratic Party. But the way the liberal-labor syndrome looked at life was not the way we looked at. We did not see the Democratic Party as the great savior of black people in this country. Therefore we did not have the habit of following blindly the ass, no matter how stupid he became . . . or how many times he kicked you . . . or did not move forward . . . or lost his way. . . . We understood, we understood all too well.

When I arrived at Atlantic City, two days after the others from Mississippi, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer had already testified before the Credentials

Committee—the first step in the battle of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation to be recognized as the rightful representatives at this convention. Mrs. Hamer has a way of describing her own life and the lives of other poor people in the Delta with such force that they become very real. Her testimony, carried over national television, stirred the hearts of many viewers. She brought to life the legal brief prepared by Joseph Rauh, general counsel for the UAW, whose true character we did not yet know, and by Eleanor Norton, a skilled black attorney. The brief argued that the regular delegates could not represent the Democrats of Mississippi because almost half of the state's population was excluded from the entire political process, including the election of delegates; that the regular delegation, aside from its racist basis, could not even be considered "loyal" to the national party because the state Democrats had several times bolted—most recently by coming out for Goldwater. These were solid arguments, but would they be heeded? We knew better, and went on pushing. . . .

We had worked an entire summer, done a tremendous amount of organizing, but we had not done enough to prepare people in Mississippi and in SNCC for the kind of political machinations, double crosses, and treachery that always went on at these conventions. . . .

The delegates from Mississippi . . . refused the crumbs offered them. They had come from Mississippi to challenge the seating of the regular Democratic Party and they felt they were entitled to the regular seats. "We didn't come all this way for no two seats!" Fannie Lou Hamer exclaimed. . . .

*7.8 and 7.9 The other major focus of the summer, the Freedom Schools, are reviewed below by one of their organizers, Liz Fusco. The schools, under the direction of Staughton Lynd, a young white history professor at Spelman College, and staffed by experienced and novice teachers, taught the three R's and material relevant to the students' experiences, particularly African-American history. Fusco's piece is followed by several poems written by the Freedom School's students, compiled by COFO and published in book form, with a moving introduction by Langston Hughes.*

**7.8 Liz Fusco, "Deeper than Politics: The Mississippi Freedom Schools," *Liberation* (November 1964), pp. 17-19.**

The original plan for Freedom Schools developed from Charles Cobb's dream that what could be done in Mississippi could be deeper, more fun-

damental, more far-reaching, more revolutionary than voter registration alone: more personal, and in a sense more transforming, than a political program. The validity of the dream is evidenced by the fact that people trying desperately to keep alive while working on voter registration could take seriously the idea that Mississippi needs more than for Negroes to have the right to vote.

The decision to have Freedom Schools in Mississippi seems to have been a decision, then, to enter into every phase of the lives of the people of Mississippi. It seems to have been a decision to set the people free for politics in the only way that people can become live and that is totally. It was an important decision for the staff to be making, and so it is not surprising that the curriculum for the proposed schools became everyone's concern. They worked and argued about what should be taught, about what the realities of Mississippi are, and how these realities affect the kids, and how to get the kids to discover themselves. And then, Staughton Lynd, the director, came in to impose a kind of beautiful order on the torment that the curriculum was becoming—torment because it was not just curriculum: it was each person on the staff painfully analyzing what the realities of the world were, and asking . . . what right he had to keep it from them until now. And because of these sessions, the whole concept of what could be done in Mississippi changed. It was because the people trying to change Mississippi were asking themselves the real questions about what is wrong with Mississippi that the summer project in effect touched every aspect of the lives of Negroes in Mississippi, and started to touch the lives of the whites as well. . . .

The so-called "Citizenship Curriculum" set up two sets of questions. The "primary" set was: (1) Why are we (teachers and students) in Freedom Schools? (2) What is the Freedom Movement? (3) What alternative does the Freedom Movement offer us? The "secondary" set of questions (which seemed to me more important because more personal) was: (1) What does the majority culture have that we want? (2) What does the majority culture have that we don't want? (3) What do we have that we want to keep?

The continual raising of these questions in many contexts may be said to be what the Freedom Schools were about. This was so because in order to answer them it was necessary for the students to confront other questions of who he is, what his world is like, and how he fits into or is alienated from it. . . .

The kids began to see two things at once: that the North was no real escape, and that the South was not some vague white monster doomed



irrationally to crush them. Simultaneously, they began to discover that they themselves could take action against injustices which have kept them unhappy and impotent.

Through the study of Negro history they began to have a true sense of themselves as a people who could produce heroes. . . . Beginning to sense the real potency of organized Negroes in Mississippi, the kids in the Freedom Schools found an immediate area of concern in the Negro schools they attended or had dropped out of: the so-called "public" schools. They had grievances, but until drawn into the question-asking, had only been able to whine, accept passively, or lash out by dropping out of school or getting expelled. By comparing the Freedom Schools with the regular schools, they began to become articulate about what was wrong in the regular schools and the way things should be instead. "Why don't they do this at our school?" was the first question asked; and then there began to be answers which led to further questions, such as "Why don't our teachers register to vote, if they presume to teach us about citizenship?" "Why can't our principal make his own decisions instead of having to follow the order of the white superintendent?" "Why do we have no student government?" or "Why doesn't the administration take the existing student government seriously?"

Always in the end, the main question was why are we not taken seriously—which came also out of why there are no art classes, no language classes, why there is no equipment in the science labs, why the library is inadequate, the classes overcrowded. This is of course the question that the adults were asking about the city, county, and state, and the question that the Freedom Democratic Party asked—at the Democratic National Convention. . . .

### 7.9 SNCC, *Freedom School Poetry*, 1965.

"I am Mississippi Fed," Ida Ruth Griffin, age 12, Harmony, Carthage.

I am Mississippi fed, I am Mississippi bred,  
Nothing but a poor,  
black boy.

I am a Mississippi slave, I shall be buried in a Mississippi grave,  
Nothing but a poor, dead boy.

"Fight on Little Children," Edith Moore, age 15, McComb.

Fight on little children, fight on  
You know what you're doing is right.  
Don't stop, keep straight ahead  
You're just bound to win the fight.

Many hardships there will be;  
Many trials you'll have to face.  
But go on children, keep fighting  
Soon freedom will take hardship's place.  
Sometimes it's going to be hard;  
Sometimes the light will look dim.  
But keep it up, don't get discouraged  
Keep fighting, though chances seem slim.  
In the end you and I know  
That one day the fact they'll face.  
And realize we're human too  
That freedom's taken slavery's place.

"Freedom in Mississippi," David March, age 16, Indianola.

In the middle of the night,  
a stressive bell of Hope is ringing  
Everyone is on the eve of fear and success  
is not yet come  
Until Everyone Wakes up and Speaks out  
in an overcoming voice, the slums will Remain.  
Let Not the pulling out of a few  
go down the whole crowd.  
If this remains we will forever be  
under bowed.

"Mr. Turnbow," Lorenzo Wesley, Milestone.

I know a man who has no foe  
His name is Mr. Turnbow  
He is about five feet six  
Every time you see him he has a gun or a brick.  
If you want to keep your head  
Then you'd better not come tripping around his bed.  
When he talks to you  
His fingers talk too.  
Some people will never understand  
But Mr. Turnbow is a good old man.

"Mine," Alice Jackson, age 17, Jackson.

I want to walk the streets of town  
Turn into any restaurant and sit down  
And be served the food of my choice,  
And not be met by a hostile voice.  
I want to live in the best hotel for a week,

Or go for a swim at a public beach.  
 I want to go to the best University  
 and not be met with violence or uncertainty.  
 I want the things my ancestors  
 thought we'd never have.  
 They are mine as a Negro, an American;  
 I shall have them or be dead.

*7.10 On one level, Freedom Summer represented the apex of the civil rights movement. The campaign mobilized thousands of volunteers (if one includes support outside of Mississippi), tackled injustice in its most entrenched and repressive form, touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of black Mississippians, and gripped the attention of the entire nation. Yet, on another level, Freedom Summer stood as the crossroads of an era. Tensions that had simmered below the surface before the summer came out into the open afterward. Militant activists in and around SNCC and CORE grew disillusioned with liberal allies, tired of the nonviolent method, and even came to question the value of integration. Bringing white volunteers to the state brought valuable national attention and manpower, yet it also reinforced a sense of dependency on whites.*

*Regardless of the impact that Freedom Summer had on the national scene, Mississippi would never again be the same. In the following piece, Mike Thelwell and Lawrence Guyot, two MFDP leaders, mapped out a strategy for black Mississippians to follow. They called for organizing an independent political party, one which would operate within the democratic system but which would be built by and for Mississippi blacks. MFDP followed this advice, building an independent political movement, which, on occasion, allied with another reform caucus in the state. In 1968 the two groups successfully challenged the regular Democrats at the Democratic convention in 1968. And in 1972, as part of the Loyal Democrats, former Mississippi activists—such as, Aaron Henry and Charles Evers (Medgar's brother)—represented the state at the Democratic convention, pledged to George McGovern.*

**7.10 Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell, "Toward Independent Political Power," *Freedomways* (Summer 1966), pp. 246-254.**

It is not possible here to go into the machinations of the leadership of the National Democratic Party which managed to avoid any vote of the convention on the issue. The important fact that emerged was that the leadership of the Democratic party—which is to say the political leadership of the nation, at this time—was not prepared to end or even amend its relationship of fraternal coexistence with Mississippi racism. The public relations gesture of offering the MFDP delegation two seats "at large" was at best a slap on the wrists of the "regulars" a pat on the head of Mis-

issippi's Negroes. It made no pretense of meeting the claims of the MFDP delegation for representation for Mississippi's black population.

One side effect of the MFDP delegation's rejection of the token offer should be mentioned. This is the response of truly surprising vindictiveness—and scarcely disguised contempt for the members of the MFDP delegation—with which "liberals" in the National Democratic Party greeted our rejection of the compromise. Inherent in the charge that the delegation was "manipulated" to reject this gesture is the notion that the members of the delegation who were present at the risk of jail, loss of livelihood, and even life, were somehow unable to recognize that they had been deprived of a vote by the full convention, and were being asked to accept a meaningless gesture that meant no change in the condition that had brought them to Atlantic City in protest.

Back in Mississippi people across the State were watching on every available television set and saw that the "system" was vulnerable. That week of TV coverage did more than a month of mass meetings in showing people that there was nothing necessary and eternal about white political supremacy, and that they—who had been told by the system that they were nothing—could from the strength of organization affect the system.

Of equal importance was the fact that we emerged from the campaign with a state-wide network of precinct and county organizations and an Executive Committee representative of all five Congressional districts. It is possible that with all the national furor caused by the Convention challenge, this legacy of grass-root, structured organization on a statewide basis will prove to be the most lasting, effective product of that challenge. . . .

It is the MFDP's position that the route to effective political expression in Mississippi lies, at least in the immediate future, in independent political organization in the black community. For one thing, there are just no other possibilities. Behind its facade of moderation, the racist state Democratic party appears unable to moderate its actions or policies, or even to give a convincing appearance of having done so, in order to appeal to the Negro voter. . . .

While waiting for the vote to become a reality, we can use the time to strengthen and deepen the level of organization across the state, and develop the political consciousness in the community. Mississippi is the only state in which there is a state-wide, active and viable framework of organization in the Negro community. Our job now is to establish and entrench in every Negro community the tradition of active participation in politics, in which the people will understand that their involvement and control of *their own* political organization is their strongest weapon. . . .

Our job must be, then, to continue organizing these black voters into an independent political organ capable of unified action on the state level. If this appears to "introduce racial politics and further polarize the state," as the national Democrats like to claim, that's all right. Once we have this organization functioning, white allies of all stripes, moderates, liberals and even radicals, can blossom in the ranks of the white party, for ultimately no politician is going to ignore that kind of political strength. . . .