

“A DREAM DEFERRED”: THE SOUTHERN NEGRO YOUTH CONGRESS, THE STUDENT
NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE, AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

“WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?”

—LANGSTON HUGHES

When the inimitable W. E. B. Du Bois stepped to the podium in Columbia, South Carolina’s Township Auditorium late that Saturday afternoon, October 20, 1946, he proudly peered out over an enthusiastic crowd. A loud speaker carried his long-awaited message to those eager to hear him yet unable to get in; the overflow had gladly assembled on the lawn outside the auditorium. On the occasion of its Seventh Annual Southern Youth Legislature, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) was delighted to be honoring Du Bois: “the senior statesman of the American Negro’s liberation struggle, the noble and peerless patriarch of our steady climb out of slavery’s darkness into the light of full freedom.”¹

Before an audience of over 2,000, Du Bois spoke prophetically of a future black freedom movement coming out of the South led by the region’s black youth, a movement that he hoped would transform the South, the nation, indeed the world. “The future of American Negroes is in the South,” Du Bois proclaimed. “I trust then that an organization like yours is going to regard the South as the battle-ground of a great crusade.... This is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the African Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies; for the emancipation of the colored races” Du Bois’ stirring message ignited applause from the audience, which took his message to heart. For, as SNYC officially observed, “In paying tribute to Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois we honor not only the man, but our generation as well.”²

Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., “a clarion voice for justice and progressive legislation,” according to SNYC, had been scheduled to speak that Friday evening, but had been unable to make it. SNYC clearly saw itself in Congressman Powell’s political stridency and his progressive social democratic politics. The group also linked the charismatic and militant Congressman Powell to an august line of past racial leaders that SNYC lionized. That line stretched far back, including slave revolt instigator Denmark Vesey; Underground Railroad Conductor Harriet Tubman; David Walker, “whose ‘appeal’ stirred the callous conscience of a complacent America”; and last but certainly not least, the peerless African American freedom fighter Frederick Douglass.³

Saturday Night's headliner was none other than the incomparable Paul Robeson, another SNYC hero. Robeson, they explained, personified the best of world culture precisely because his "genius was wholly dedicated to the advancement of men toward a civilization of true brotherhood." He was "our modern-day Paul Bunyan Our Everyman, preaching the democratic idea and practicing what he preaches." His greatness and influence was in fact global in reach. "Not only to Negro youth is he the shining symbol of our highest hopes and our growing courage; the oppressed and despised, the hopeful and striving men and women of all nations and colors know him as a friend and advocate. They love him as we do."⁴

Four years earlier, in 1942, Robeson had given his first concert in the South at the Fifth All-Southern Negro Youth conference at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Previously, because of his principled refusal to sing before segregated audiences, Robeson had not performed in the Jim Crow South. On that mid-April night, for that special performance, however, SNYC assured Robeson that he would perform before an integrated audience. And he did, magnificently. SNYC stalwart Esther Cooper Jackson later recalled that at that 1942 conference, "We ran into an older black woman as she came across the campus and very proudly announced, 'There's no segregation here tonight! Mr. Robeson is going to sing.'"⁵ Four years later, in Columbia South Carolina, when Robeson reprised that earlier triumph in Tuskegee, that repeat triumph appeared to augur well for the future of his sponsors, the radical youth of SNYC.

The Southern Negro Youth Congress had begun a decade earlier, as the Great Depression went into its second downturn and the New Deal increasingly seemed like the same old deal and all too often worse, for blacks. SNYC, however, began on a very auspicious note, as the youth section of the National Negro Congress (NNC). The National Negro Congress had begun amid much hope and excitement in 1936 as an umbrella organization combining a spectrum of African American freedom struggle organizations and personalities. This continuum encompassed conservatives and progressives, militant unionists, Socialists and Communists, Democrats and Republicans, NAACP folk and Urban Leaguers. The National Negro Congress in effect started as a big-tent organization seeking to unite diverse elements within the Black Freedom Struggle. In spite of a spate of noteworthy achievements, particularly in pushing black unionization, the Congress' rocky history never matched that initial sense of hope and enthusiasm.⁶

In spite of the creation of the National Negro Congress, it immediately became clear to those active in the youth section of the Congress that an independent, southern-based youth movement was imperative to push a dual yet interrelated agenda: the concerns of black youth specifically and blacks generally. In the heady context of the wide-ranging social activism spawned by the Depression and the gathering clouds of European war, youth activism mushroomed, especially among college youth.⁷ SNYC's founders and activists

were part of this yeasty moment and thus envisioned the organization as “an independent regional youth movement, not as a break away from the NNC.” The point was “to give particular attention to southern youth.”⁸

James Ashford, a SNYC organizer from Arkansas, was known for arguing with his northern cohorts that “our people aren’t going anywhere until there’s a militant mass movement in the South.” In a like spirit, James Jackson, a SNYC organizer from Richmond, perceived the need for a training ground where the race’s future leaders would come together to envision a better future, develop strategies to realize that future, and then work ceaselessly to bring that future about. Vital to this vision was the careful cultivation of the activist voices and works of southern black youth. In large measure because of the extreme repressiveness of Jim Crow, the voices of southern black youth were too often muffled and unheard, and their work within the ongoing Black freedom Struggle too often silenced and ignored, if not crushed. Jackson later recalled sensing at the time the need for a progressive awakening among southern black youth. “After some months it became clear,” he later recalled, “that southern youth were not as aggressive and articulate in their pattern and style as the youth of the big cities of the North.”⁹

In stark contrast to the suffering and deprivation of the Depression, the resolution leading to the founding of SNYC exuded youthful idealism and a gripping sense of historical possibility. The spirit animating the group at its beginning was both audacious and hopeful.

We, the Youth Section of the national Negro Congress, realizing the vast possibilities in the millions of young people, unawakened and uninformed; the disinherited sharecropper, the tenant farmer, the workers of the field, young people whose future outlook is one of monotonous toil without any hope of security or happiness, resolved that we cast our lot with Southern brethren knowing that ultimate success will not be achieved until the South is free.¹⁰

SNYC’s identifications were multiple and crosscutting: racial, age cohort, radical resistance, regional, national, and global. The organization’s identification with the South, where most blacks still lived, was crucial. A central theme throughout the organization’s history was the core belief that the most crucial terrain of the Black Freedom Struggle, where SNYC must therefore focus its energies, was in fact the South. The call for the initial conference set the tone and made the point. “We are the Negro Youth of the South. We are proud of every inch of Southern soil. We and our fathers [and mothers] before us have given the toil and sweat of our brow that the land of our birth might prosper. We are proud of the generations of Negro people

of the South, we are proud of the traditions of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman.”¹¹

The daunting challenge of ameliorating the suffering and deprivation of the Depression demanded concerted social and political youth activism. Jackson envisioned this uncommon challenge as the mission of the youth. That we had nothing to protect in terms of creature comforts. We had no wealth, no housing; we had only our needs and our hopes and dreams and aspirations. Therefore, youth could take the front ranks. Youth could do things that older people could not undertake for whatever reasons.. This was the challenge we accepted. We projected this program of urgent demands in all areas.¹²

Similarly, the call for the 1940 annual conference further specified the role of progressive black youth in the evolving Black Freedom Struggle, noting that

The world progresses in the heart and mind of its youth. A race climbs likewise. The Negro youth are the hope of their race, as the youth are the hope of every race. As Negro youth grow in understanding, life will be better for them and for all of us, here in the South and elsewhere.

Developing the “understanding” of Negro youth demanded education, politicization, and meaningful action.

Coming together on Wednesday February 13 and Thursday February 14 in 1936 what emerged as the organizing conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress drew 534 excited and mostly southern black delegates, including some 2,000 observers, to Richmond, Virginia’s Fifth Street Baptist Church. The dates were important: marking the birthdays of Frederick Douglass (February 14)¹³ as well as Abraham Lincoln (February 12). Delegates included “students, farm hands, sharecroppers, coal miners, domestic workers,’ as well as middle class professionals and community members. Almost half of the delegates were young women. The average delegate age was twenty-two. The diverse group participated in workshops and heard from the likes of John W. Davis, NNC’s Executive Secretary; Communist Party celebrity Angelo Herndon; and, Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson, Howard University’s first black President. The convention adopted resolutions calling for more and better jobs; better educational opportunities, including the teaching of Negro History; better health and recreational facilities; increased interracial activism; strengthening black institutional life; and, full citizenship rights, notably untrammelled access to the ballot.¹⁴

A special highlight of the inaugural conference was Dr. Mordecai Johnson's keynote address. In that speech, Johnson, a strong SNYC supporter over the years, praised the strength and audacity of the youth's program and urged them to bold action to achieve their goals. Deeply concerned about the protection of free speech and civil liberties, Johnson maintained that "The greatest danger to Democracy in America is not Communism or Socialism, but the political situation in which most men are no longer free to express themselves." In addition, Johnson urged the youth to think and act independently. Jackson recalled: "He challenged the youth not to be intimidated by the elders, to beware of the icy hand of tradition that would restrain the momentum and initiative of the young generation."¹⁵ Almost twenty-five years later, at the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in April 1960, legendary Black Freedom Activist Ella Baker similarly urged that generation of student activists to think and act independently, not to be constrained by the Civil Rights establishment.¹⁶

The organizational structure that emerged from that initial conference encompassed an Executive Committee led by an Executive Secretary and an Adult Advisory Board of notable elders. Dr. Frederick Patterson, President of Tuskegee Institute, headed up the Adult Advisory Board for most of the organization's history. At the outset, that list included Charlotte Hawkins Brown, President of Palmer Memorial Institute; Du Bois, at that time a Professor at Atlanta University; James Shepard, President of North Carolina Central College; Alain Locke, Howard University Professor of Literature and Philosophy; and Fisk University sociologist Charles S. Johnson.

Most important, a loose network of local councils and clubs conducted the actual grassroots work of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. That work, led by local youth leaders, included anti-lynching, voter registration, civil rights, labor organizing, educational, and health and recreational campaigns. That initial year saw the creation of at least twenty councils, drawing upon local high schools, colleges, labor locals, and political and social organizations. The first national office found a home in the historic Consolidated Bank and Trust Building in downtown Richmond home of the first American bank to be headed by a black woman, Maggie Lena Walker. When the Southern Negro Youth Congress relocated to Birmingham, Alabama in 1939, the organization found a home in the black Masonic Temple Building.¹⁷

In mid-February 1936, at the inaugural meeting, hopes ran high, outstripping the anticipated anxiety. A young John Edwards from Richmond remembered, "We felt that relief was finally on the way ... this was going to be a turning point." Dr. C.C. Scott, pastor of the Fifth Street Baptist Church and host of the inaugural SNYC convention, was very impressed. He was especially taken with the Southern Negro Youth Congress' militancy and progressive politics, as well as the diversity of those in attendance, including a fair number of

progressive whites. Particularly striking was the broad age range: “young adolescents, middle aged men and women and old folks.” The range of political opinion was equally striking. “There were among them Communists, Socialists, Democrats, Republicans and Catholics, as well as a few Jews thrown in for good measure.”¹⁸

Hosea Hudson, legendary black Communist and Alabama labor organizer, saw in the Southern Negro Youth Congress a much-needed, indeed indispensable, organization dedicated to the Black Freedom Struggle: a militant and essential black southern organization dedicated to the protection of black life and property and the recognition and extension of black rights. Hudson explained that:

We black people didn't have no mass organization in the South before then. Nobody said nothin' police shoot down a Negro, it just a Negro shot down. Some may have grumbled among themselves, but nobody said nothin'¹⁹

The Southern Negro Youth Congress not only said something, but also, like militant youth organizations in the 1960s, most notably the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Southern Negro Youth Congress actually did something. They not only protested rhetorically, but they actively resisted; they took concerted action. The Southern Negro Youth Congress made the struggle against police brutality and racist lawlessness priorities, and in spite of the organization's limited resources, they labored diligently to alleviate these galling wrongs.²⁰

In the course of its first year, the Southern Negro Youth Congress got off to a rousing start. Easily the most noteworthy achievement that initial year was the successful union organizing campaign SNYCC helped to mobilize against Richmond's powerful British-American Tobacco Company. Led by James Jackson and Chris Alston, Jackson's friend and organizer for the upstart Congress of Industrial Organizations, or the CIO, the campaign garnered considerable SNYC support as well as widespread support within Richmond's large black working class. As a youngster growing up in a solid middle class family near the factory where these overworked and underpaid black women toiled, Jackson watched as they passed by, often with children in tow, often before daybreak and after nightfall. The unconscionable inequity of it all seared Jackson's consciousness.

Principally through Jackson and Alston, the Southern Negro Youth Congress worked intimately with these struggling yet committed black women tobacco workers, whose oppression Jackson likened to that of “chattel slaves.” The militant campaign featured meetings, strikes, jailings, and many tense moments. But, within several weeks, the more than 5,000 black workers prevailed, establishing the CIO-affiliated Tobacco Workers and Stemmers Industrial Union, achieving better working conditions and almost doubling the wages

for its courageous and proud members. In the wake of this success, young organizers fanned out to places like Winston-Salem, Durham, and Raleigh to help create locals of the union. SNYC-assisted efforts to unionize domestics in certain communities expanded. In addition, worker's education classes teaching reading, writing, and basic civics as well as the benefits of trade unionism evolved alongside these organizing efforts.²¹

The first year also found the Southern Negro Youth Congress involved in several other kinds of programs. Deeply aware of the necessity of collaborating closely with established Black Freedom Struggle organizations and ongoing freedom struggle campaigns, SNYC worked with the NAACP on its anti-lynching campaign. Likewise, they collaborated with the National Urban League in its vocational educational work. Reflecting SNYC's core commitment to developing youth leadership, they held that year in King's Mountain, North Carolina, the first of a number of "Youth Leadership Training Seminars." In a related vein, as part of their core commitment to cultural work as essential to advancing the Black Freedom Struggle, they created a Negro Community Theatre in Richmond under the leadership of Thomas Richardson. They also put on concerts featuring artists such as Roland Hayes and the Eva Jessye Choir. Throughout its history, cultural work remained a key aspect of the Southern Negro Youth Congress' organizing and mobilizing campaigns.

When the group met in Chattanooga, Tennessee from the first through the third of April 1938 for the second annual convention, expectations and hopes ran high among the almost 400 delegates. For a small, fledgling, yet deeply committed black youth organization engaged in difficult, frustrating, and all too often dangerous grassroots political work, these annual conventions were especially important as morale boosters, recruitment and publicity vehicles, and social events. In his "Greetings" to the delegates, Edward Strong made crystal clear that while hard work and hope were essential,

Our problems today are acute. Three-quarter million of us are unemployed. One sixth of the nation's youth have venereal diseases. One hundred thousand youth have been sent home from the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. Five Scottsboro boys remain in prison. The fascist war lords are waging war against the Ethiopian, Austrian, Spanish, and Chinese young people. Our neighboring youth in Canada and Mexico are threatened by the blackest scourge of the modern world—fascism. And this black death has invaded our domain—America.

The Southern Negro Youth Congress was indeed acutely aware of the enormity of the challenges they confronted. As a result, SNYC focused intently on how to "lay the practical basis to meet them," with precious few resources and limited clout at best.²²

Undaunted, the “infant Congress” re-dedicated itself to its founding mission, as announced in its *Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth*.

We are the Negro Youth of the South. We are they whose forebears have striven and suffered to create the wealth and beauty that crown our lands today. Grandsons and granddaughters of slaves, we are the third generation after the War Between the States; we have new chains which bind us, new shackles to be broken. In farms, in schools, in churches; in mines, mills, and factories, from Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains to the southernmost tip of the Lone Star State, we stand determined that in this land where our fathers died we shall win for ourselves and for all men “freedom, equality, and opportunity.”²³

The 1942 Nora Wilson case perhaps captured at its best the grassroots activism of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. An eighteen year-old teenager who lived with her family near Millbrook, Alabama, Nora Wilson had left school because her father had contracted malaria and her mother, a sharecropper, needed help raising her six younger children. Upon learning that her eleven year-old sister Adrien had been accused by the Woodburns, a neighboring white family, of stealing six ears of corn, Nora Wilson went to the Woodburn home to investigate. Ms. Wilson’s lack of servility outraged Mrs. Woodburn, who slapped Ms. Wilson because of her willingness to stand her ground and speak her mind. After Mrs. Woodburn apparently sought out a gun, Ms. Wilson left for home. Soon thereafter Nora Wilson was arrested for assault and battery with intent to kill, and her bail was set at \$1,000. Without access to bail money and acting without the advice of family, friends, and a lawyer, Ms. Wilson waived her right to a jury trial and was promptly convicted and sentenced to prison in Wetumpka, Alabama Women’s Prison. The penalty came in two phases. First, for violating Jim Crow social norms and cursing a white woman, Ms. Wilson was given eight and one-half months. Second, at the conclusion of the first phase of punishment, Ms. Wilson was then to stand trial for assault and battery with intent to kill. Tellingly, local authorities spurned Mrs. Woodburn’s request to have Ms. Wilson’s sentence dropped.

The Southern Negro Youth Congress first heard of Nora Wilson’s case through her mother, who shared her daughter’s desperate plight with the Caravan Puppeteers, a group — according to Johnetta Richards, the historian of SNYC — “of young black youths, under the auspices of the American Youth Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Congress, who used puppet shows to entertain and inform rural southern black people.”²⁴ The Caravan Puppeteers functioned as a popular cultural wing of SNYC, educating

and entertaining rural southern blacks about “the movement for the abolition of the poll tax, the drive for voter registration, the necessity of labor unions and the Southern Negro Youth Congress.”²⁵

That summer of 1942, upon hearing of the rank injustice of Nora Wilson’s case, the Caravan Puppeteers contacted SNYC’s Birmingham, Alabama national headquarters. Field Representative Arthur Price, working closely with Executive Secretary James Jackson, and Malcolm Dobbs of the League of Young Southerners (the youth division of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare [1938-1948]) fought hard for her release. They hired a lawyer and created a publicity campaign, including a fundraising effort, pushing for her release in the media, petitions and telegrams. The Millbrook, Alabama Youth Council, consisting largely of Nora’s friends, formed to help with the campaign agitating for her release. The campaign to free Nora Wilson soon succeeded, as authorities dropped all the charges against her, even before she completed the initial incarceration phase of her punishment. This victory for black civil liberties and Nora Wilson buoyed SNYC’s hopes.²⁶

Six year later, in late April 1948, those hopes were on the ropes. A telegram to US Attorney General Tom Clark captured the imminent danger of the moment. Strenuous local white opposition threatened not only to disrupt the proceedings of the Southern Negro Youth Congress’ annual meeting in Birmingham, but also to halt them altogether. The telegram read:

Every type of intimidation is being used by the Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene Bull Conner, and his officers to deprive our organization of the right to free assemblage in holding our biennial meeting scheduled to open today. He declares that he has the support of the Klan in his efforts. Citizen group conferences on this matter, coupled with the reign of terror here[,] force the realization that the constituted authority of Birmingham offers us no protection. We urge your immediate assistance[,] including official telephonic contact with the commissioner.²⁷

Not surprisingly, federal assistance never materialized.

Sixteen years later, on the front lines of the Black Freedom Movement in McComb, Mississippi, besieged Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee workers’ sense of frustration and alarm was similarly exacerbated by then Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s inaction in the face of extreme white repression of local black civil rights activism. Jesse Harris, director of SNCC’s McComb Project incessantly yet unsuccessfully pleaded for help with Burke Marshall, Attorney General Kennedy’s point man on Civil Rights. Harris argued that it was imperative that the Justice Department act upon its authority and intervene directly “to take action before it is too late.” Federal inaction, Harris pointed out, threatened the lives of those engaged in the McComb struggle. The official federal view that police action in these kinds of matters was a state

rather than federal responsibility. Harris contended, was both dubious and unconscionable. When the US Attorney General “announces that there is little the federal government can do to prevent a reign of terror in Mississippi, he has really given notice to every racist thug and vigilante in Mississippi, and throughout the South, that ... the present administration finds it politically inexpedient to exercise its constitutional mandate.”²⁸

Federal inaction in 1948 and in 1964 notwithstanding, the African American Freedom Struggle persevered against often-terrible odds, in Birmingham, in McComb, throughout the South and the rest of the nation. In Birmingham in late 1948, close to 200 battle-weary activists of the Southern Negro Youth Congress had assembled from across the South with their characteristic high hopes and realistic expectations. Even in that increasingly anti-black, anti-radical, anti-labor, and anti-Communist moment, the Southern Negro Youth Congress remained defiantly radical. Even in 1948, they called for: the end to Jim Crow; the end to all barriers to voting; a strong national Fair Employment Practices Law; a federal anti-lynching law; equal educational opportunity; adequate housing, health care, recreational, and cultural facilities; the destruction of white supremacy; and an end to Universal Military Training and related efforts to militarize American youth and create a third world war.²⁹

A year before, in a 1947 press release, the Southern Negro Youth Congress outlined “Eight Tasks for the 80th Congress,” as central to their own social democratic program and as part of their lobbying effort in the nation’s capital. Particularly noteworthy were the calls for a hike in the minimum wage, restoration of price controls, national health insurance, extension of Social Security benefits to “Domestic, Casual, and Agricultural” laborers (categories in which blacks were overrepresented), and federal aid to education.³⁰

Audaciously militant in their commitment to democracy, civil liberties, civil rights, and human rights, the Southern Negro Youth Congress developed interracial as well as intraracial alliances, global as well as national links. Internationalist, they staunchly supported the United Nations and anti-colonial struggles worldwide. Indeed their foundational commitment to democratic self-determination as well as internationalism led them to work with progressive whites in youth organizations like the American Student Congress and the World Student Congress. As noted earlier, it also meant working with progressive southern whites in organizations like the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) and its youth wing, the League of Young Southerners, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund(SCEF), which in 1946 grew out of SCHW.

Vigorously pro-labor and pro-worker’s rights, as evidenced in the Southern Negro Youth Congress’ close working relationship with the CIO, SNYC likewise forged ties with the AFL. The point was to “spread a

labor consciousness among blacks,” or more specifically to build black support for the train union movement. To advance the cause of organized labor among blacks SNYC sponsored labor youth clubs. Economic justice rooted in a fair and livable wage for workers was always a primary plank in SNYC’s platform. In “The Tasks of our Generation,” SNYC Executive Secretary Edward K. Weaver observed in 1948 that “Winning economic security depends on the concrete things which we can do to eliminate the degradation of sharecropping, reduce skyrocketing prices, free the trade unions from the crippling burden of the vengeful Taft-Hartley law, and improve the position of negro workers within the unions. We must also win for Negro youth equal chances for apprenticeship and on-the-job training and up-to-date guidance.”³¹

The Southern Negro Youth Congress’ bold vision of and unwavering commitment to black youth activism appealed to innumerable blacks, including the venerable Alain Locke. Locke likened SNYC to other important contemporary youth movements around the globe, including the All Indian Nationalist movement, the Young Egyptians, the Young Turks, and the Zionist Movement. In 1940, Locke enthusiastically characterized SNYC as “the most historic development among southern Negroes since Reconstruction.”³²

Not surprisingly, the Southern Negro Youth Congress’s radical politics alienated some within the black community. The fact that SNYC included Communists among its founders and most prominent members alienated a number of blacks as well, many of whom reflected the increasingly staunch anti-Communism of the era. This was especially the case as the anti-Communist crusade and its associated early Cold War hysteria waxed in the late 1940s.

Nevertheless, as late as 1948, the year after SNYC made the Attorney General’s list of subversive organizations, the group listed among its eminent sponsors former Dean of the Howard Law School Charles T. Houston, a key early architect of the NAACP legal strategy that culminated in the *Brown* decision; Charles G. Gomilion, head of the Education Department at Tuskegee; and Luther Porter Jackson, Professor of History at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. The Advisory Board still listed Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown and Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, New Deal official and friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Within the year, however, the Southern Negro Youth Congress ceased operations, hounded out of existence as part of the expanding Communist witch hunt. This moment also began SNYC’s slide into historical oblivion, an oblivion that has recently lifted in large part because of a spate of important scholarship and the end of the Cold War.

LEGACY, POLITICS, AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

The historical importance of the Southern Negro Youth Congress is undeniable. Without a mass African American insurgency to sustain it and without the support of sympathetic segments within the American media, as we saw in the Civil Rights-Black Power Insurgency of the post-World War II era, SNYC blazed a bold Black freedom struggle path that merits far more scholarly analysis. In effect, why has the history of the Southern Negro Youth Congress not yet found its place in the emerging history of the twentieth-century Black Freedom Movement narrative? In addition, there is as of yet no full-scale history of twentieth-century African American youth/student activism. The question must be asked, though: what would such a history encompass and what role would SNYC play in it?

Current historical understanding centers SNCC and its history as the central story in the yet-to-be-written but emerging narrative of twentieth century African American youth/student activism. As historians, we are still plotting what went before SNCC and what came after it. I want to suggest two things. First, precisely because of its singular significance, SNYC's history must be fully understood on its own terms. Second, in crucial ways that demand critical analysis, SNYC paved the way for SNCC as well as the modern Civil Rights-Black Power Movement. As a result, SNYC's history must be an integral component of both a history yet-to-be-written of twentieth-century African American youth/student activism as well as a revised narrative of the twentieth century African American Freedom Movement.

In spite of the differences between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and, even, the Black Panther Party, on one hand, and the Southern Negro Youth Congress, on the other, there were compelling similarities among them as youth/student movements and as key organizations in the history of the modern Black Freedom Movement. These similarities, as well as differences, merit thorough historical investigation. While SNCC will likely still command center stage, at least for crucial moments, in both of these histories, SNCC must share the historical stage. Indeed a most revealing feature of the dominant representations of the history of SNCC, and to a lesser extent the Black Panther Party, is its insularity from a history, a genealogy, of previous and subsequent African American student movements and protests.³³ The effect is to render SNCC's powerful and extraordinary history "sui generis," as exceptional, as fundamentally unique in African American experience, as essentially apart from what went on before and subsequently. Such a history becomes virtually trans-historical. This of course we know to be historically inaccurate. Still, the question persists: Why has SNCC come to represent twentieth-century African American youth/student activism to the virtual exclusion of all other African America youth/student organizations? What uses, functions, and interests does this particular historical portrait serve? How do we craft a fuller, richer, more

accurate history of twentieth-century African American youth/student activism? In turn, how do we craft a fuller, richer, more accurate history of the twentieth-century African American Freedom Movement?

Several explanations help us to understand why, how, and with what consequences SNCC dominates scholarly and popular understandings of twentieth-century African American youth/student activism. First, as previously suggested, SNCC's actual centrality to the modern African American Civil Rights-Black Power Movements in large measure accounts for this fact. Put another way, SNCC's historical significance is powerful and therefore undeniable. Second, SNCC's history is a vital element of the most felt and enduring narrative representations of the modern African American Freedom Movement. Third, scholars, activists, and SNCC veterans have kept alive not only the memory of SNCC, but also striking visions of SNCC's historical singularity.

Those engaged in presenting and analyzing the history of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, however, must necessarily overcome the amnesia and neglect that all too often afflicts black radical histories, notably those with significant Communist story lines. Only in the last few decades have we begun to come out from under the related Cold War-Anti-Communist hysteria that shaped American popular and scholarly understanding and practice. While its enemies often charged that it was Communist, or worse, SNCC was not. Unlike SNYC, which embraced its Communist affiliations, for better and for worse, SNCC steered away from any such affiliations, for the obvious reasons. Seen another way, in the necessary search for historical inclusion and legitimacy, those telling and writing the stories of the Southern Negro Youth Congress have necessarily battled the anti-radical and anti-Communist biases of popular and scholarly understanding and practice.

An especially telling aspect of this troubling legacy has been not simply the scholarly effort to disassociate and separate the histories of the Southern Negro Youth Congress and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, but also to minimize the historical significance and impact of SNYC. The shameful redbaiting and disremembering of SNYC has shaped the received yet flawed wisdom of the fundamental discontinuity between SNYC and SNCC. The point here is not to suggest that there were not discontinuities between these organizations, because there clearly were. Rather, the point here is to suggest that there were also continuities between them. While the complexities of differing historical contexts shaped these discontinuities, similarities of aspiration, vision, and consciousness shaped these continuities.

Envisioning the Southern Negro Youth Congress has often meant seeing it in relation to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as paving the way for both SNCC and the modern African American Freedom Movement. The opposite is not true, however. In large part out of widespread ignorance of SNYC's

history, few SNCC folk at the time saw themselves in SNYC, and, as noted previously, scholarship and popular understanding reflects this notion.³⁴ SNCC veterans, like the legendary Robert Moses, admit that they simply had no prior knowledge of SNYC, notably as they created early SNCC. Yet, even as SNCC veterans and scholars of SNCC have learned of SNYC's history, this knowledge has not substantially altered the insularity and narrowness of SNCC's origins narratives.³⁵

The venerable Ella Baker, SNCC's midwife, clearly knew of SNYC. Baker herself came of age politically in 1930s New York City, working in a cauldron of activism, especially youth/student activism. For a time she worked in George Schuyler's Young Negroes Cooperative League. The lessons learned from SNYC's history, in particular its demise at the hands of Red Scare-Cold War repression, were not lost on Ms. Baker. While no militant anti-Communist herself, she fully understood that SNCC must remain independent, non-sectarian and as non-ideological as possible. As noted previously, her profoundly influential counsel steered SNCC in that direction. While SNCC was created in the throes of the rapidly developing Sit-In phase of the Civil rights Movement, at the time there was apparently no substantial discussion of the history of African-American youth/student activism, such as that of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.³⁶

Howard Zinn, another of the early adult advisors to SNCC, like Baker, was not a knee-jerk anti-Communist. At the moment of SNCC's founding, he, too, saw the organization's non-ideological focus, its non-sectarianism, as a strength rather than a liability. In turn, Zinn touched upon a paradox that underlay SNCC's viability, notwithstanding its radicalism, especially in the early 1960s. Speaking to Daniel Bell's consensus vision of *The End of Ideology* in postwar America, this paradox was the non-ideological character of "participation in ideological movements today." As Zinn observed in his invaluable 1964 attempt "to suggest the quality of their contribution to American civilization," SNCC had "a different quality than that of earlier American student movements—the radical student movements of the thirties": to reiterate — the non-ideological character of this ideological movement.³⁷ In other words, early SNCC sidestepped the radical partisan politics that enlivened youth/student movements of the 1930s and contributed to their undoing when the antiradicalism of the Red Scare-Cold War was unleashed.

Zinn explained that unlike youth/student activists of the 1930s, apparently like those of SNYC, the 1960s youth/student activists of SNCC "have not become followers of any dogma, have not pledged themselves to any rigid ideological system. Unswerving as they are in moving towards certain basic goals, they wheel freely in their thinking about society and how it needs to be changed." In essence, SNCC activists "are radical, but not dogmatic: thoughtful, but not ideological. Their thinking is undisciplined; it is fresh, and it is new." At another point, he likewise noted that "These are young radicals; the word 'revolution' occurs

again and again in their speech. Yet they have no party, no ideology, no creed. They have no clear idea of a blueprint for future society.”³⁸ In fact, this characterization might easily have been applied to many if not most SNYC activists as well.

Put another way, as acknowledged earlier, SNCC was neither Communist nor Communist-inspired, and most assuredly not a Communist Front. Consequently, unlike SNYC, SNCC could successfully resist the redbaiting of its opponents. In Zinn’s estimation:

The talk about “Communist” influences in SNCC comes mostly from people who simply don’t know the organization, or the people in it. SNCC is fundamentally a group of Black Belt and Northern Negroes who are angry at American Society and determined to change it, who have little or no contact with formal racial ideologies or movements. Here and there may be one or two people at intermediate levels on the SNCC staff who’ve read a little Marx and are consciously sympathetic with one or another communist or socialist governments in the world.

Zinn perceptively noted that in 1964 “there is no single meaning of ‘Communism’ or ‘Communist.’” Instead there are “varieties of communism ... in different parts of the world.” A bit over-optimistically, he concluded that “the term ... has lost its capacity to alarm.”³⁹

In 1964 the Cold War-Red Scare propaganda machine had functionally erased the Southern Negro Youth Congress from American historical consciousness. In a sense, that omnipresent and highly repressive machine relegated SNYC —and comparable organizations, moments, and personalities — to a kind of historical oblivion, historical purgatory, or historical netherworld,. This is the domain of the truly forgotten and neglected, of deeply repressed historical memory. It is also the domain of the historically trivialized and misrepresented.

Unfortunately, historians, those entrusted with the responsibility to get it right, to get to the “historical truth,” likewise fell victim to the truth-defying Cold War-Red Scare propaganda machine. Rather than search out and establish the “historical truth,” they succumbed to a version of events framed by head anti-Communist spook J. Edgar Hoover. W.E. B. Du Bois’ insight in another context, that of the massively distorted and viciously racist historical caricatures of Black Reconstruction for most of the twentieth century, ring painfully true in this context. Du Bois explained: as scholars “we are blind and led by the blind. And why? Because ... we fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.”⁴⁰

Even in 2013, long after the formal end of the Red Scare-Cold War era, that period's insidious intellectual and political effects persist. Far too often Movement scholarship still remains unable to see "the beloved community" of SNCC in SNYC not only because of a lack of knowledge about SNYC, but also because of the involvement of radical black Communists in the latter. Even armed with basic knowledge of SNYC as a progressive Black Freedom organization, a clear forerunner of SNNC, this scholarship too often either ignores or pays lip service to SNYC and those who went before. Conventional scholarship all too often not only ignores SNYC, but also reinforces the misperception of SNYC and like organizations as unrepresentative, as outliers, as exceptions to the norm and the rule of SNCC. These moves reiterate the master narratives of consensus and discontinuity, all the while replicating the historical line of SNCC's historical distinctiveness, ignoring the continuities between SNYC and SNCC.⁴¹

It must be acknowledged, of course, that some kinds of links are more easily acknowledged than others. It is not unusual for SNCC veterans and scholars of SNCC to see the organization in less ideologically charged personalities like Gandhi, and less ideologically charged movements like Berkeley's 1964 Free Speech Movement and the Anti-Apartheid Movement of the 1980s. Similarly, as evidenced by Sinn's resonant characterization of SNN activists in 1964 as the "new abolitionists," it is easier to see SNCC in earlier, less-ideologically driven radical social movements like nineteenth-century American abolitionism.⁴² Yet seeing SNCC in the comparable and more directly related radical lineage of SNYC, however, has thus far proven more difficult, if not impossible.

One of the elite African American supporters of the Southern Negro Youth Congress in the early 1940s was Lincoln University President Horace Mann Bond. Because of the anti-Communist witch-hunt against the organization in the mid-forties, however, President Bond, like many of the former elite African American supporters of SNYC, disassociated themselves from the organization. Over a decade later, Julian Bond, President Bond's son and storied SNCC and Civil rights stalwart, helped to start the 1960 Atlanta Sit-In Movement while a student at Morehouse College. Only later, much later in fact, did he learn of SNYC. In his Foreword to the *Freedomways* Reader (2000), he acknowledged that the modern Civil Rights Movement had "roots as much in the 1860s as the 1950s, the 1940s, and the 1930s." Likewise, in *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*, Cheryl Greenberg speaks of SNCC having modeled itself "on preceding grass-roots political struggles, especially those of Mohandas Gandhi in India and leftist and civil rights demonstrations in the United States."⁴³

Freedomways (1961-1986), a journal with strong radical black roots, including Southern Negro Youth Congress ones, committed itself to advancing the modern Black Freedom Movement. In many ways it

represented the reincarnation of SNYC's militancy. In his Afterword to the Freedomways Reader, David Levering Lewis, historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W.E.B. Du Bois, as evoking that spirit. This evocation, Lewis noted, could be seen in the magazine's efforts "to contextualize the struggle, to give it what French historians used to call the long duree," or what Esther Cooper Jackson, Freedomways editor and SNYC stalwart. Calls "a long period of struggle." Historian Jacqueline Hall has dubbed it "The Long Civil Rights Movement." That struggle, Lewis maintained, began a long time ago.

Before King and Malcolm and Wilkins and Carmichael, James Farmer, H. Rap Brown, and Fannie Lou Hamer, there had been the Old Left when it was young with its interracialism, its Louis Burnhams and Ben Davises calling for economic empowerment of the poor, its civil libertarian precocity in the first hours of Scottsboro, and its pathbreaking *Southern Negro Youth Congress*⁴⁴ [my italics].

Several important studies over the last several decades have helped recover aspects of the history of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. For example, in 1990, in his pioneering *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, historian Robin D.G. Kelley analyzed SNYC as an important element of community and labor struggles. Most compellingly, Kelley demonstrated how communism was made and remade on the ground in the context of local life and struggles. In this context, Communism operated as a flexible set of beliefs and practices that were anything but doctrinaire. For Alabama's black Communists and those within SNYC in particular, Communism functioned as a set of tools: a means toward the end of Black Liberation.⁴⁵

In *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama —The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, Diane McWhorter showed the Southern Negro Youth Congress in Birmingham to be "a dress rehearsal for a modern civil rights movement." SNYC, she observed "had been conceived as a mass movement of churchgoing 'basic folks.'" Ideologically, the organization worked to raise the level of black consciousness in various manifestations, including class as well as race. Programmatically, it evolved an African American movement culture that featured "'mass meetings' and 'demonstrations,' staples of the future movement Louis Burnham, whose heroes included not only Lenin but Gandhi, had even considered organizing a black political party under the slogan "Non-Violence and Non-Cooperation."⁴⁶

Erik S. Gellman's *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights*, published in 2012, is a very important contribution to our understanding of the Southern Negro Youth Congress as well as the National Negro Congress (NNC). "This book,"

Gellman writes, “tells the story of how the NNC and its independent youth affiliate, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), demanded and attempted to enact a ‘second emancipation’ for African Americans between 1936 and 1947.”⁴⁷ Gellman’s analysis is particularly rich and revealing in its treatment of the efforts of SNYC and NNC to promote unionization among African Americans. In his compelling narrative, Gellman models the kind of progressive revisionist scholarship we sorely need.

There is still much work to be done in both the construction of a history of African American youth/student activism and the plotting of the role of the Southern Negro Youth Congress in that history. A critical challenge posed by the work of those like Kelley, McWhorter, and Gellman is to ensure not only that the history of the southern Negro Youth Congress be recovered. But, in addition, that this radical history be fully integrated into dominant historical narratives and mainstream historical consciousness. Finally, one thing is very clear: as with the construction of a history of African American youth/student activism, the inclusion of the story of the Southern Negro Youth Congress within a re-telling of the history of the African American Freedom Movement, indeed the history of American Freedom, demands a critical shift in perspective. That perspective must center the fact that African American freedom and indeed American freedom remain ongoing struggles. As Angela Davis observes:

there has been no attempt to assimilate the legacies of the Southern Negro Youth Congress into a triumphant narrative about American democracy. There has been no attempt to assimilate the legacies of the Communist Party, at least not explicitly, precisely because the legacies of James and Esther Jackson and those with whom they worked and struggled for so many decades, point to unfinished agendas of freedom. Such legacies that require continued struggle for democracy, freedom, and socialism could never be made to justify a so-called war on terror. The Jacksons and their comrades fought and continue to fight for a freedom that could never be assimilated into a project of U.S. global domination through war and torture, through the wholesale denial of civil rights and human rights.⁴⁸

The struggle continues!

¹ “Youth’s Tribute To Our Senior Statesman,” Southern Negro Youth Congress Souvenir Journal, Southern Youth Legislature, Columbia South Carolina, October 18-20, 1946, p. 7; Box ?; Folder ?.

-
- ² W.E.B. Du Bois, "Behold The Land," October 20, 1946, SNYC Congress, Columbia, SC, in *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Century*, edited by Esther Cooper Jackson and Constance Pohl (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 6-7.
- ³ "Hon. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: Modern Statesman," *SNYC Souvenir Journal*, 1946, p. 4.
- ⁴ "Paul Robeson—Hero," *Ibid.* p. 2.
- ⁵ Interview with Esther and James Jackson," Hatch-Billips Collection, April 5, 1992, p. 172.
- ⁶ Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2012).
- ⁷ Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); Robert Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973. Originally published in 1935.)
- ⁸ Interview with James and Esther Jackson, Hatch-Billips Collection, p. 165.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Cited in Johnetta Richards, "The Image and Accomplishments of the Southern Negro Youth Congress," in Gerald A. McWorter, *Black Liberation Movement: Papers Presented at 6th Annual National Council for Black Studies Conference* (Urbana: Afro-American Studies Research Program, ?), ?.
- ¹¹ Conference Call, cited in Jacksons Interview, Hatch-Billips Collection, p. 167.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Frederick Douglass was born in February 1818; the precise day remains unknown. Because Douglass himself did not know the actual date of his birth, he chose to celebrate in on February 14. Over time, that day became the day Negro History officials adopted and celebrated as his birthday.
- ¹⁴ Richards, "Images and Accomplishments of SNYC," pp. 6-8.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8; Interview with the Jacksons, p. 168.
- ¹⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 239.
- ¹⁷ Richards, "Image and Accomplishments of SNYC," 6-8, quotation, 7-8.
- ¹⁸ Johnetta Richards Interview with John Edwards, 14 September 1978; Dr. C.C. Scott cited in Editorial, *Richmond Planet*, 20 February 1937, p. 4; both cited in Richards, "Image and Accomplishments of SNYC," 9.
- ¹⁹ Johnetta Richards Interview with Hosea Hudson, 18 August 1977; cited in Richards, "Image and Accomplishments of SNYC," 9-10.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*; In addition, see Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*. Gellman's extensive treatment of SNYC insightfully contextualizes the organization's militant politics and activism. Similarly, see also, David Levering Lewis, Michael H. Nash and Daniel Leab, eds., *Red Activists and Black Freedom: James and Esther Jackson and the Long Civil Rights Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- ²¹ Hatch Interview with the Jacksons, 169; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," *Freedomways*, no. 1 (1964), in Esther Cooper Jackson and Constance Pohl, eds., *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 17.
- ²² Souvenir Program of the Chattanooga Conference of SNYC, April 1, 2, 3, 1938, p. 3.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁴ Johnetta Richards, "The Southern Negro Youth Congress: A History, 1937-1949" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1987), p. 81. The American Youth Congress fought for the rights of youth in the context of the Depression and New Deal and featured a number of white and black progressive activists, including Socialists and Communists, a number of whom worked also with the Southern Negro Youth Congress. For a full treatment of the American Youth Congress, see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was*

Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941 (New York: Oxford Univ Press, 1993); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), 352-4, 358.

²⁵ Richards, "The Southern Negro Youth Congress," p. 81.

²⁶ On the Nora Wilson case, see Richards, "The Southern Negro Youth Congress," pp. 81-84.

²⁷ Telegram from Louis E. Burnham to Attorney General Tom Clark, Washington, D.C., dated April 30, 1948 (?), SNYC Papers (HU), Box ?; Folder ?.

²⁸ "Federal Inaction Challenged," *The Student Voice* 5:22 (September 23, 1964), 3.

²⁹ Find resolutions adopted at the 1948 Birmingham convention.

³⁰ Find 1947 press release.

³¹ Edward K. Weaver, "The Tasks of Our Generation," *The Southern Negro Youth Congress Souvenir Journal*; *Southern Youth Legislature* (Birmingham, Alabama, April 30, May 1, 2, 1948), p. 4?. Locate Box and Folder.

³² Alain Locke cited in Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001), p. 59.

³³ For example, see Clayburne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981); Cheryl Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1998); Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2007); Faith S. Holseart, et.al., eds, *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: Univ. Illinois Press, 2010); *Stayed on Freedom: Reflections on SNCC at 50* (Swarthmore College, 2011)

³⁴ This is an impressionistic assessment based on an unsystematic survey of a number of SNCC veterans.

³⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*; Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust*; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*; Holseart, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*; *Stayed on Freedom*.

³⁶ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 82-91; Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: Jon Wiley & Sons), 30-36.

³⁷ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 1, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 270, 271.

⁴⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York, Atheneum, 1970, originally published in 1935), 727.

⁴¹ Carson, *In Struggle*; Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust*; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*; Holseart, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*; *Stayed on Freedom*.

⁴² Zinn, *SNCC*.

⁴³ Interview with Julian Bond, ? find date; Julian Bond, Foreword, *Freedomways Reader*, xvii; Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust*, 18.

⁴⁴ David Levering Lewis, Afterword, *Freedomways Reader*, 382; Jacqueline Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91:4 (2005), 1233-1263.

⁴⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1990).

⁴⁶ Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama—The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001), p. 78.

⁴⁷ Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 2.

⁴⁸ Angela Davis, "James and Esther Jackson: Connecting the Past to the Present," in Lewis, et.al., eds, *Red Activists and Black Freedom*, pp. 102-103.