

More Than a Symbol Of Freedom: Education for Liberation and Democracy

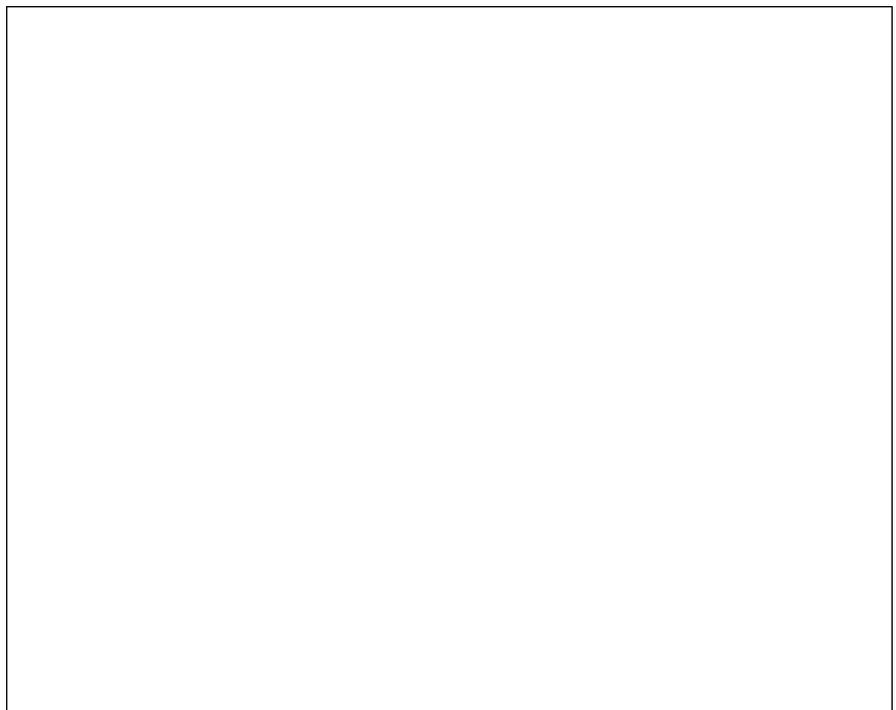
Mr. Payne finds that today's African American young people are confused and conflicted about their history. This alienation from the past contributes to civic disengagement in the present. Part of the solution, he suggests, is a revival of the Freedom School approach, which links an appreciation of African American history to the cultivation of a sense of social responsibility.

BY CHARLES M. PAYNE

For the slaves, literacy was more than a symbol of freedom; it was freedom. It affirmed their humanity, their personhood.

— Theresa Perry¹

IN THE 1920s, according to the historian Lawrence Levine, black college students were often reluctant to sing spirituals in public, for they associated the music of their parents and grandparents with the degradation of slavery.² Eighty years later, one need not attend many blues festivals to see that young African Americans show little interest in that part of African American heritage. Indeed, something beyond ordinary change in generational taste seems to be responsible. Asked why they distance themselves from the blues, young black people frequently echo their counterparts from the 1920s, rejecting the blues as a symbol of a shameful past that is best forgotten. "Nobody wants to go back to shacks and picking cotton in the hot



fields,” as the blues artist Little Milton puts it, explaining the perceptions he has to struggle against.³ A cultural form that generations of black people found life-affirming may now be more emotionally accessible to young white people than to the descendants of the people who shaped the music.

Most Americans think of the civil rights movement as a moment of triumph, but in recent years, when doing presentations about the civil rights movement in black schools, I have learned not to be surprised if some students feel a need to distance themselves from even that history, sometimes very aggressively. Watching news clips from the period, students may laugh at the demonstrators and deride them for their foolishness and weakness, for taking all that stuff from white people. A movement that has inspired other movements around the world has come to be rejected by some of the people one might most expect to identify with it.

In his history of the struggle to establish unions in Memphis, Tennessee, Michael Honey describes a generation of black men and women fresh out of the fields of Tennessee and Mississippi who had to fight shop by shop and job category by job category to make it possible for black people to get decent work at union wages. The cohort of younger blacks coming after them, of course, walked through relatively open doors. As we might expect, they did not understand the price their predecessors had paid to open those doors, but their attitudes went beyond that. Some of them thought of the previous generations as Uncle Toms, as having taken too much crap from white folks. Ignorance about one’s predecessors is one thing; faint contempt is another.⁴

The confusion of African American young people about the African American past and their fear of that history raise important questions about their civic engagement: what they are being taught, what they are picking up from popular culture, and how they are putting it all together. And those questions raise a series of questions about how these youngsters are processing race in their daily lives and about what that portends for their capacity to engage in some of the collective striving that helped liberate their ancestors. Pushing away the past may foreclose possibili-

ties for civic participation in the present. This article will explore some of these issues.

NEGOTIATING RACE

Consider the words of Peter Humphries Clark, a 19th-century black leader:

I do not forget the prejudice of the American people; I could not if I would. I am sore from sole to crown with its blows. It stood by the bedside of my mother when she bore me. It darkens with its shadow the grave of my father and mother. It has hindered every step I have taken in life. It poisons the food I eat, the water I drink and the air I breathe. It dims the sunshine of my days, and deepens the darkness of my nights. It hampers me in every relation of life, in business, in politics, in religion, as a father or as a husband. It haunts me walking or riding, waking or sleeping. It came to the altar with my bride and now that my children are attaining their majority, and are looking eagerly with their youthful eyes for a career, it stands by them and casts its infernal curse upon them. Hercules could have as easily forgotten the poisoned shirt which scorched his flesh, as I can forget the prejudices of the American people.⁵

Speaking at an Emancipation Day ceremony in Dayton, Ohio, in 1873, Clark eloquently captured the pervasiveness of race. However much the structure of race has changed in 130 years, his words still resonate. A great many African American young people still experience race as pervasive. They know that race implies something about what forms of cultural expression are expected of them, something about their intellectual capacity (including what courses they should take), something about their manhood or womanhood. They know that it problematizes “their humanity, their personhood,” and they know that it cannot be talked about in polite company.

Today’s youngsters are unlikely to face the constant and open discrimination that Clark would have known. But the ideological structures of race are as much a part of their world as of his, and they as much as Clark have to negotiate those structures in order to figure out how to move in the world. Every time a child passes an honors classroom and the teacher is white and all the students are white, Clark’s darkening shadow is right there, offering up the obvious interpretation.

Race is treacherous terrain. We should not be surprised if some of the paths youngsters choose to negotiate it are dead ends. For some, that can mean an overwhelming need to project hipness, toughness, and masculinity; for others,

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a constant defensiveness, guarding against unspoken accusations. Even on elite college campuses, it is still common for black students who find themselves struggling in a course — and this may be especially true of math and science courses, the courses in which racial stereotypes are most relevant — to be reluctant to seek help because doing so would reinforce traditional stereotypes of black intellectual inferiority. They may never have heard of Stepin Fetchit, but they live in fear of him. These are the nation's most privileged black youths, but they can still be intimidated by the echoes of racist discourse.

Actually, we should not be surprised that even privileged black youngsters feel the need to defend the race. Claude Steele has done an important series of studies on “stereotype threat,” the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or the fear of doing something that confirms such a stereotype. His investigations have demonstrated not only that stereotype threat can have a dramatic negative impact on intellectual performance but that the impact is greatest among the most achievement-oriented, most skilled students.⁶ Steele hypothesizes that one has to care about a domain in order to be worried about the prospect of being stereotyped in that domain. Less successful students can protect themselves by withdrawing from academic competition, by deciding that it isn't important to them.

Among students in troubled urban neighborhoods particularly, low achievement does more than encourage disidentification with school; it may encourage students to disidentify with one another. At least, that is one way to think about the aggressive interpersonal patterns in such neighborhoods, patterns often shaped around insults and put-downs. Adolescents of all ages engage in mean-spirited teasing, but African American youths have raised it to the level of an art form. They have more words for “put-down” than the Inuit have for “snow”: the dozens, joning, ragging, sounding, capping, cutting, snapping, scoring, signifying. There are some differences among the terms, but the idea of insult is common to them all. Many of the insults that are hurled back and forth are references to hair, lips, skin color, breath, body odor, and intelligence — the traditional stuff of racist discourse. Indeed, the best way to think about this practice may be to take it as a form of internalized racism. The world devalues them, and they respond by devaluing others, by symbolically separating themselves from the stigmatized. If I say that your clothes are “weak” and your lips look like old liver, then I imply that mine are better. “Black” remains a term of derogation on too many playgrounds. Playing insult games well certainly demands considerable mental and verbal agility, but not in a form

the rest of the world recognizes as intelligence.

At this point, we probably don't know enough to be certain about how immersion in symbolic aggression affects development. But, on the face of it, we should be concerned that it may be encouraging a social ethic of contempt that centers on finding and celebrating the weaknesses of others — hardly an ethic conducive to positive civic engagement later on.⁷ Doubt and insecurity masquerade as aggressiveness, which, of course, could be said about many of the self-projections one finds in the inner city, most obviously some of the desperate forms of masculinity one finds there.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison constructs a scene in which a group of boys light into a dark-skinned girl, taunting her for being dark-skinned — “Black e mo. Black e mo.” Morrison writes:

That they themselves were black . . . was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the . . . insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds — cooled — and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path.⁸

The experience of Marc Elrich, a teacher from Montgomery County, Maryland, suggests something of how far the absorption of racial stereotypes by black youths can go. Describing a series of discussions about race in a sixth-grade classroom in which most students are reading two years below grade level, Elrich finds that most of his black students see black people as bad people — and not in the ironic sense of “bad.” They think that black people are dumber than whites or Asians, that they don't like to work hard, that black men are unreliable. “My students had developed a bipolar view of the world with whiteness and goodness at one pole and darkness and badness at the other.”⁹

It is quite possible that responses like this are context-specific and a context other than a classroom discussion might tap a different set of connotations. It is quite possible that, when they are a few years older, these youngsters will develop more sophisticated ways to process the same issues. Nevertheless, incidents such as these warn us that many black youngsters are trapped between what they understand as a history of collective humiliation and a set of contemporary social images that seem to confirm the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with black people. From these perceptions, they must fashion a sense

of self, without, in too many cases, much help from the adult world. There is little evidence that African American parents, irrespective of social class, are talking systematically to their children about race.

EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION

These patterns do not bode well for civic engagement. African Americans have traditionally had very distinctive norms with regard to civic participation. They have been joiners — more likely than whites of similar social status to be members of labor unions, social clubs, fraternal orders, political organizations, and churches. In the late 19th century and for most of the 20th century, African Americans reacted to oppression by coming together to confront life's issues, large and small. If young African Americans allow themselves to be drawn into the pattern of constructing a positive image of themselves by constructing negative images of others, living and dead, and then distancing themselves from those images, the result could be the adoption of an individualistic ethos that makes it harder to pass on the norms that once held the racial community together and a simultaneous weakening of the mutual respect and self-confidence that undergirds democratic participation.

Lawrence Goodwyn, a student of mass democratic movements, has argued that such movements are initiated by people who have attained a high degree of personal political self-respect, but he has also argued that the growth of the movement requires the development of “collective self-confidence,” the two constituting “the cultural building blocks of mass democratic politics.”¹⁰

The decline in civic participation that has characterized the U.S. as a whole in recent decades has affected African Americans as well. Since the 1980s, their rates of group membership have fallen to approximate those of white Americans, suggesting the erosion of an important form of social capital in African American life. If we look more specifically at changes in patterns of participation in community-oriented activities (working with others on local problems, contacting a local official, helping to form a group to solve a local problem), we find what one analyst calls a “startling” change, the most dramatic part of which is a sharp decline in the participation of the least well-educated African Americans. Those with less than a high school di-

ploma were several times more likely to be participating in such community activities in 1967 than in 1987, raising “serious questions about the transmission of participatory norms that have characterized black civic life for generations.”¹¹

Part of the problem may be that this generation of African American youths is the generation that has been least exposed to some important forms of social education and least supported by the accumulated understandings of previous generations. The remarks of Peter Humphries Clark were made at an Emancipation Day ceremony, a celebra-

tion once ubiquitous in the black communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Often the single most important annual event in the life of a community, these celebrations typically featured ex-slaves and Union veterans talking about the black role in ending slavery and rebellion. Thavolia Glymph calls

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Emancipation Day ceremonies “schools of citizenship,” places where black people ritually reenacted their understanding of a heroic past in ways that gave them a larger sense of possibilities in the present.

Similarly, in his study of the epic struggle of black Floridians to attain the right to vote after World War I, Paul Ortiz argues that the consciousness which underlay that fight was shaped through rituals of remembrance — Lincoln-Douglas Day, Fifteenth Amendment Day, Decoration Day, community pageants, and, above all, Emancipation Day.¹² After the first few decades of the 20th century, much of this kind of education continued in other venues. In the South, segregated schools could, if the faculty members were so inclined, take advantage of their isolation to preserve their own sense of the past. After World War II, NAACP Youth Councils and the rapidly expanding black colleges offered a safe space for the discussion of social issues and race.

One of the least-studied aspects of the social agitation that characterized much of the 1960s and 1970s is the educational programs it stimulated, nearly all of which were intended to demystify race in some way. Among the best known are the Freedom Schools that the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) established in Mississippi, serving over 2,500 students during the summer of 1964. They were largely the brainchild of SNCC's Charlie Cobb, a Howard University student who wanted to create something that would encourage students “to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teach-

ers a real question” and that would “make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action.” Cobb added, “Their creativity must be molded from the rhythm of a muttered ‘white son-of-a-bitch,’ from the roar of a hunger bloated belly and from the stench of rain and mud-washed shacks. What they must see is the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America.”¹³

The most distinctive component of the curriculum of the Freedom Schools was the citizenship curriculum, built around a set of core questions:

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?

In such a context, the meaning of race could be approached in several ways — through discussions of black history and the freedom movement, discussions of black language and white language, discussions of poor whites and how they were being manipulated into hatred, discussions of how young people felt about their parents and why, discussions of the position of blacks in Mississippi compared to that of Jews in World War II Germany.

Drawing on the Mississippi model, the Children’s Defense Fund currently has a growing network of as least 60 summer Freedom Schools.¹⁴ It is widely agreed that the students of college age who staff these schools profit as much from the experience as the younger students who attend them.

Another project very true to the spirit of the Freedom Schools is the Sunflower County Freedom Project, which is dedicated to “building a corps of academically capable, socially conscious, and mentally disciplined young leaders in the Mississippi Delta.” Students graduating from sixth grade are expected to make a six-year commitment to the program — to after-school study sessions, Saturday school, and intensive summer programming. In addition to the usual academic enrichment component and a martial arts component, there is a strong emphasis on social issues and social responsibility. Students have recently read Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*, and Deborah Ellis’ *Breadwinner* — the last about a girl growing up under the Taliban

in Afghanistan. Appropriately enough for a Mississippi-based program, the students are immersed in the study of the African American struggle for freedom, which includes writing

original plays about the movement and taking part in a national tour. Older students do social justice internships with nonprofits in Washington, D.C. Overall, the program tries to continuously convey the message to students that the opportunities they have were won through the struggles of their

ancestors and that they have a parallel obligation to create opportunities for others.¹⁵

Even more directly related to the Mississippi experience is the Young People’s Project, an outgrowth of the Algebra Project, founded by Bob Moses, SNCC’s project director for Mississippi in the 1960s. SNCC’s work was predicated on the idea that everyone should have voice in the decisions that affect their lives. The Algebra Project proceeds from the belief that in the 21st century mathematical literacy is the prerequisite to having some control over one’s life, much as reading literacy was the key to full participation in society in the 19th century. That is, the sharecroppers of this century will be the quantitatively illiterate.

Starting in the sixth grade, the Algebra Project works to dramatically increase mathematics achievement among inner-city and low-income youths, immediately assaulting the idea that mathematics learning is beyond these students. That stereotype is so deeply embedded that, when youngsters find out they can in fact do math they never thought they could do, their sense of their own possibilities changes in fundamental ways. After graduating from college, some of the first students to go through the program gravitated back to help develop it, eventually forming the Young People’s Project, which recruits younger students to start demanding high-quality mathematics. High school students can find themselves designing tutoring programs, raising funds, conducting workshops for teachers, acting as teaching assistants in classrooms, and helping to mobilize community support. These older students have more influence on younger students than many adult teachers. They can make the study of mathematics seem “cool.” Since the program evolved out of the civil rights movement, students are given a thorough exposure to that history, another step in the process of developing young people who think they can shape a more just society, who can “see differently and act accordingly.”¹⁶

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Among the most widespread forms of contemporary education for liberation are the “rites of passage” programs that have proliferated in urban areas. These are adaptations of the coming-of-age ceremonies common in Africa and other preindustrial societies. While they can be structured in a variety of ways, most involve using the study of African societies to get youngsters to examine their own values and their own society. Many require some form of community improvement project. Ranging from a few weeks to much longer in duration, they conclude with a ceremony acknowledging that the young people involved have passed a marker on the road to maturity. Students from a girls’ rites of passage group reflected on their own growth:

My name is Corneta from Richmond, Virginia. [At the Rites of Passage group] we cut out pictures and decided how our future was going to be. I learned when somebody tries to hurt you, don’t be afraid to do something about it. I learned to be nice. We learned to respect our elders and not to be rude. We learned African Dances and we dressed up in pretty African wraps. I would like to do it again because it’s a chance to get away from home, learn something new, and make new friends. I think Rites of Passage means to be careful to other people and not to be rude

* * *

I’m Charlan from Columbia, Maryland, 14 years old. I learned self-control, to have more love toward my brothers and sisters and I learned to interact with people more. I see myself really successful.¹⁷

As the quotes suggest, most programs stress individual values and self-reformation, which might be thought to predispose students toward defining social problems in in-

dividual rather than political terms. In fact, most of these programs come out of such strong traditions of social critique that it is unlikely they will let students lose sight of the structural roots of social problems. Their message is that social change requires that individuals work to transform both themselves and the larger society.

Contemporary programs in the tradition of education for liberation frequently share certain features. They require that students rethink the nature of their connectedness to others, they encourage students to rethink the way the past affects their present, they widen the kinds of social experiences available to youngsters, and they involve youngsters in doing meaningful things in their communities — often things that we don’t expect young people to do. All of this is happening in an atmosphere of social critique in which there are likely to be committed adults. We are not lacking in important and instructive initiatives, but the prevalence of confused racial imagery among black students suggests that we are not offering nearly enough to speak to the need.

Nor is that need entirely a black one. At a 1998 conference in Atlanta on “Education for Liberation,” one of the least well-attended workshops was titled “Freedom Schools for White Youth.” Even people who are thinking about more powerful forms of social education for children of color do not necessarily see the point of it for young people in the majority group. White children are presumed to be whole.

In fact, racial privilege and class privilege bring their own ways of not seeing. One of the most instructive analyses of how this plays out is from Michael Moffat, an anthropologist who spent a year living in a Rutgers dormitory, trying, among other things, to understand how college students think about group differences. It goes without saying that they had little historical information with which to work, but Moffat emphasizes that they also lacked conceptual tools for thinking about social issues with any complexity. About the only concept they had for thinking about group difference was “culture,” of which they had a shallow understanding. They had little language that would help them frame race or any other social issues in structural terms, so they ended up thinking in interpersonal terms (“How come the black students don’t socialize with us? How come they aren’t friendly?”).

Moffat characterized the thinking of these students as “ahistorical individualism,” a mindset that left them no way to get a grasp on contemporary racial issues.¹⁸ We may now be coming to a historical moment when the traditional racial denial of white people (“Racism is in the past, it’s best not to talk about all that old stuff, it just stirs

up resentments, and blacks weren't the only people discriminated against, anyway") is coming to be matched by the "disremembrance" of black people.

I borrow the term "disremembrance" from Thavolia Glymph. She notes that it frequently appears in slave narratives, where it connotes a kind of "false consciousness on the part of black persons who were thought to have acted in seeming disregard of their history and in particular, of the freedom struggles of black people."¹⁹ A close contemporary equivalent might be "people who forget where they came from." The historian Herbert Gutman refers to situations in which people become "victims of a truncated and shrunken historical consciousness," deprived of access to the "historical processes that shaped their lives, the lives of their parents, and the nation at large."²⁰

What they do have access to, of course, is the usual stock of demeaning stereotypes and confusing images about race, past and present. For black people, it is a pattern that may make it difficult for one generation of African Americans to pass on to the next those parts of their cultural heritage that they most want to preserve. It becomes a kind of negative social capital. For too many white people, this pattern may mean that social analysis seldom rises above the personal level of who likes whom and why.

Even if schools were not currently being forced into increasingly narrow conceptions of human development, these problems are too deep and entangled to be addressed by schools alone. Sorting them out will require the reinvigorated efforts of whole communities. Denial and disremembrance call for some form of massive community-based education, a modern equivalent to Emancipation Day and similar customs. Certainly a part of the process of responding to that need must be making the various contemporary efforts at liberatory education (for majority and minority youths) more visible, figuring out what effect they are having and how they can be built on. And that, too, will require the best efforts of entire communities.

Historian Vincent Harding writes that too many "young people have been separated from both their past and their future, leaving a vast and aching void, often to be filled with nothing more than the most destructive values of society." The people who have already been working on programs of emancipatory education have much to teach us about the challenge Harding places before us, the challenge of finding "a way for such young people to re-enter the humanizing flow of history, to consider the possibility that there is purpose and meaning in their lives far beyond the terror and temptations of their immediate situation."²¹

1. Theresa Perry, "Up from the Parched Earth: Toward a Theory of African-American Achievement," in Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III, *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 13.
2. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
3. Quoted in Stephen Kinzer, "In Search of the Blues, at Its Roots," *New York Times*, 25 March 2003.
4. Michael Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
5. Quoted in Winston James, "Being Red and Black in Jim Crow America: Notes on the Ideology and Travails of America's Socialist Pioneers, 1877-1930," in Charles Payne and Adam Green, eds., *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
6. Claude Steele, "Stereotype Threat and African-American Student Achievement," in Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, pp. 120-21.
7. Given what Cornel West calls the Afro-Americanization of youth culture, it will be interesting to see whether the insult culture becomes as institutionalized among other young people. Recently, we have seen at least one television commercial that uses the dozens to sell beer, and trash-talking T-shirts can be seen in suburban gyms. There are benign explanations about the origins of these customs. They originated in an African American fondness for wordplay, for example. But even if such explanations are historically accurate, they don't preclude the possibility that these patterns become harmful under current social conditions.
8. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 69.
9. Marc Elrich, "The Stereotype Within: Why Students Don't Buy Black History Month," *Washington Post*, 13 February 1994, p. C-1.
10. Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. xix.
11. Fredrick C. Harris, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?: The Erosion and Transformation of African-American Civic Life," in Robert Fullinwider, ed., *Civil Society and Democratic Renewal* (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999), p. 333. For data on participation and membership patterns, see pp. 324-32.
12. Paul Ortiz, *"Like Water Covers the Sea": The African American Freedom Struggle in Florida, 1877-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
13. Charles Cobb, "Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program," *Radical Teacher*, Fall 1991, p. 36. Cobb is quoted in Florence Howe, "Mississippi's Freedom Schools," in idem, *Myths of Coeducation: Selected Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 9.
14. For information on the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, see www.childrensdefense.org/bccc_freesch.php.
15. Information on the Sunflower County project can be found at www.sunflowerfreedom.org. See also the website of the Education for Liberation Network at www.edliberation.org.
16. Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). More information can be found at www.algebra.org.
17. See www.grlstories.org/rites/ROPAfrican.htm. See also the website of the National Rites of Passage Institute at www.ritesofpassage.org.
18. Michael Moffatt, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
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20. Herbert Gutman, "Historical Consciousness in Contemporary America," in Ira Berlin, ed., *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: New Press, 1987), p. 400.
21. Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 198. This book offers many ideas to educators concerned with shaping such programs. ■

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