

**‘A School for Problems’**

Gender and the Development of Citizenship Education at the Highlander Folk  
School During the Civil Rights Movement

Hannah Rosner  
Senior Thesis  
Department of History  
Columbia University

Seminar Advisor: Professor Martha Howell  
Second Reader: Professor Premilla Nadasen

April 9, 2014

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to the various TAs who met with me at different points in this process and patiently taught me what a thesis was. Thank you to my fellow thesis writers for all their feedback!

Thank you to Professor Martha Howell for her in-depth comments on structure and style and for all her encouragement along the way.

Finally, much gratitude to Professor Premilla Nadasen, who suggested this topic to me in the first place and guided me through the rich literature on women in the civil rights movement. I deeply appreciated the time, effort and knowledge she put into advising me on this project.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
Literature Review.....	7
Methodology.....	11
<b>Chapter 1: Roots</b> .....	12
Highlander’s Origins in the Labor Movement.....	12
The Formation of the Citizenship School Program.....	15
A Bridge Leader on Johns Island.....	16
<b>Chapter 2: The Listening Process</b> .....	20
‘We Talked So Loud:’ Septima Gets Myles to Listen.....	20
‘A Good Ear:’ Bernice Robinson and the Citizenship Curriculum.....	22
<b>Chapter 3: Leadership in a Gendered Context</b> .....	27
‘A Man to Represent You:’ Defining Leadership in Local Terms.....	27
‘A Man Wouldn’t Put Up With It:’ The Personal Lives of Women Activists.....	30
<b>Chapter 4: The Politics of Respectability</b> .....	33
‘We Didn’t Bother About Dressing at Highlander:’ Visual Presentation.....	33
‘Champions of Democracy:’ Highlander’s Public Relations.....	36
‘A Communist Outfit:’ The Cold War Context.....	39
<b>Chapter 5: Staff Relations</b> .....	42
‘She Never Hesitated to State Her Position:’ HFS Staff Interactions.....	42
‘He Couldn’t See It:’ Citizenship Education at the SCLC.....	48
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	52
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	55

## Introduction

*As I go about from one place to another and people are introducing me as the harassed, persecuted woman and wondering how I could take a thing of that kind, perhaps I'm a little naïve about it, but I think that my life is just as sweet or sweeter than it has ever been because I have a very free mind, I feel that all of this is really the cause that we are working for. We are working to a democracy.<sup>1</sup>*

*-Highlander staff member and teacher Septima Clark, 1959*

With these words spoken in a 1959 radio broadcast about the Highlander Folk School, Septima Clark offered her own analysis of a life of civil rights education and activism, alluding to the gendered context of her activities but also to her ability to achieve personal fulfillment by working towards democracy. Septima Clark was a native of Charleston, South Carolina and a schoolteacher. She had taught in multiple schools, including one on Johns Island, one of the Sea Islands off the Charleston coast. Her cousin and fellow Charlestonian Bernice Robinson, who would later join her on Johns Island, worked for a time in New York City before returning home to care for her family. She opened a beauty shop in Charleston where she hosted meetings of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In the 1950s, the trajectories of these two women intersected with that of the Tennessee-based Highlander Folk School, whose staff members increasingly focused on supporting the campaigns of the growing civil rights movement. Founded in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee, Highlander originally focused on labor organizing, attempting to build up local unions through education and to bridge counterproductive divides between agricultural, industrial, black and white workers. Through this work, the school's founder Myles Horton and his fellow staff members developed an organizational approach that included respect for the working-class

---

<sup>1</sup> Multiple speakers, "Highlander Story," 1959, audiocassette UC515A/119, 9:35, radio program, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

experience, had less of an established male leadership than other comparable organizations, and constructed programs in response to issues that arose on the grassroots level.

During the civil rights movement, Highlander teamed up with Johns Island resident Esau Jenkins to pilot a literacy education program meant to increase voter registration and teach people the skills necessary to exercise agency in their daily lives. The first classes were held in 1957. Women were instrumental at every phase of the program. Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson, who became fulltime staff members at this point having worked sporadically with the school since 1954, respectively conceptualized the program and served as its first teacher. In their work at Highlander, both Clark and Robinson employed various skills they had acquired through their positioning as lower class black women to craft a powerful program that defined citizenship using examples from the realities of their students' lives. They taught people to draw from their own experiences to claim political rights, just as they had done.

The Highlander context was key to the degree of agency these women exercised in the development of the citizenship schools. Because the Highlander project was very experimental and localized, it did not rely so heavily on the gendered labor divisions that commonly restricted women in larger civil rights organizations, requiring them to project a respectable, conventionally feminine image to the larger public and perform mainly secretarial work within the organization. While Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson did often struggle to assert their leadership, they still found room to manipulate gendered restrictions, often in the service of their own organizational style. Clark and Robinson were much more than just glorified administrators of the citizenship school program. They were crucial to the evolution of Highlander's mission, challenging Highlander through their organizing and teaching to truly live up to the values it professed to represent.

In 1961, all this would change. When accusations of communism led to trials that eventually revoked Highlander's charter, Highlander staff transferred the citizenship school program to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Unlike at Highlander, at organizations like the SCLC image was crucial to the success of campaigns designed to dramatize the evils of segregation to the nation. The judgment of outsiders, both sympathetic and otherwise, served as a powerful force regulating women's behavior. Additionally, sexist leadership usually assigned women purely administrative work instead of collaborating with them to shape the organization's philosophy and programs. This combination of pressures meant that women often served as symbols of the movement's respectability or worked behind the scenes rather than take on vocal leadership positions.

While both Clark and Robinson continued to work in citizenship education during the program's tenure at the SCLC, their relationship to the project was very different after 1961. Clark and Robinson resisted the SCLC staff's attempt to standardize the program, which they worried would make the originally flexible program less effective. To make matters worse, the HFS and SCLC staff implementing the standardization process relegated the two women to less influential positions, deemphasizing the importance of their voices on this issue. Even so, Clark and Robinson continued to employ the techniques they had developed at Highlander in their daily work, maintaining at least some level of agency over the program's mission. Under the auspices of the SCLC, the citizenship schools expanded to train thousands of teachers both in local communities and from the general ranks of civil rights volunteers. Overall, by 1965 Septima Clark reported that 25,000 students attended citizenship school classes and altogether the program produced over 50,000 new voters. It continued to run more sporadically after the

passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act into the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> While education was just one part of an ongoing effort to reach vast numbers of unregistered and illiterate people, the ethos of personal empowerment through a reappropriation of citizenship rights resonated with people across the South, providing impetus for their own personal activism. These ideas and the resulting increase in black voters helped change the political and social profile of the South.

By examining the role of women and gender in different stages of the development of the citizenship education program, I will show how the structure and mission of Highlander allowed Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson both to challenge and to manipulate gendered understandings of leadership to articulate and carry out an experience-based philosophy of activism, education and leadership. Their work represented a major contribution to the goals and principles of the civil rights movement as a whole and created spaces in which women could exercise a model of leadership whose strength and significance is too little recognized.

#### Literature Review: Women in the Civil Right Movement

The dominant narrative of the civil rights movement positions male religious figures as the movement's primary agents. When women play a prominent role in this narrative, it is often as symbols of the loyalty and strength of the movement's followers and grassroots volunteers. Women in major civil rights organizations were often relegated to secretarial and administrative work such as fundraising. They were responsible for carrying out the programs the higher leadership designed, but rarely did they themselves take on leadership roles that would give them national visibility. The voices of women in the movement have often been obscured in historical and public narratives. In the years since the civil rights movement leading up to today, however, historians have done much to correct the record by generating an extensive literature

---

<sup>2</sup> Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989), 235-238.

documenting the role of women in civil rights organizations and as volunteers. Women constituted a high proportion of civil rights volunteers and were crucial to activating local networks, drawing people into the movement and serving as its community leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Another category of literature seeks to explain these trends by looking at gender as both a tool and restriction of women activists. Barred from certain types of leadership and work, women developed decentralized, less hierarchical models of activism whose core tenets included personal empowerment at the grassroots level. Historians of gender sought to shed light on stereotypes about women's capabilities, personalities, sexuality, image, and place in society to explain both why many civil rights organizations excluded women from their leadership circles and how the new organizing models women created responded to gendered assumptions about activism. Numerous historians have highlighted the importance of this kind of analysis to understanding the nature of role of women in the civil rights movement beyond just their impressive numbers.

In her article "‘More than a Lady:’ Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Black Women’s Leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," Cynthia Griggs Fleming discusses the complicated gender relations at play in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and how they influenced individual women. The article describes how fellow SNCC workers deemed Robinson "one of the boys" for her reputation as a powerful, strict leader. Male colleagues associated her intimidating no-nonsense persona with what they saw as essentially masculine qualities. Meanwhile, in her article "SNCC Women, Denim, and the

---

<sup>3</sup> Historian Charles M. Payne, in *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) theorizes about the high proportion of volunteers who were women. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon in *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) seek to unearth the stories and voices of specific women who played major roles but are not well known to the general public.

Politics of Dress,” Tanisha C. Ford analyzes the complicated symbolism of dress for women in SNCC who reacted against traditional stereotypes of black womanhood by wearing jeans, a garment typically associated with sharecroppers. These women rejected the tactic of using women’s bodies to communicate middle class notions of propriety to observers of the movement.<sup>4</sup>

Danielle L. McGuire describes these traditional stereotypes and their consequences in her book *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. McGuire details how the men who eventually became the recognized leaders of what was originally a women-powered Montgomery bus boycott transformed Rosa Parks, the strong-willed anti-rape activist, into a silent, demure, maternal southern lady, a symbol of feminine morality designed to resonate with the nation as a whole and communicate the justness of their cause. This constructed narrative obscured the reality of her activist background.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars emphasized how women embedded their activism in conventionally female roles to shape the civil rights and other movements in powerful ways. Belinda Robnett describes how in many places African American women working as “bridge leaders” forged a leadership strategy that was crucial to the success of the civil rights movement. In this role, they served as the link between local communities and formal civil rights organizations such as the SCLC. Writing about black female activists during the Cold War, Dayo Gore critiqued and

---

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Griggs Fleming, “‘More than a Lady:’ Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Black Women’s Leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee” in Vicki L. Ruiz with Ellen Carol DuBois, eds., *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Tanisha C. Ford, “SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress,” *The Journal of Southern History* 79 (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

expanded on that view, explaining that black women were fundamental to the black struggle not only as organizers, as Robnett had shown, but also with regards to the development of leftist ideology during the labor movement and the Cold War, as they were in the position of being able to speak about issues of both race and sexuality.<sup>6</sup> While Gore focuses primarily on women in socialist and communist political organizations, her work shows that it is important to rethink our understanding regarding the different ways activists construct their organizations' philosophies.<sup>7</sup>

There are several full-length works written about the history of Highlander, including John Glen's *Highlander: No Ordinary School* and Aimee Isgrig Horton's *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961*.<sup>8</sup> These books provide a general narrative of the school, focusing on its educational philosophy. While they mention the women involved, neither writer specifically employs a gender analysis. Katherine Mellen Charron's recent biography of Septima Clark, *Freedom's Teacher*, one of the most reliable sources of information about the program, provides great detail regarding gender dynamics by describing the relationship between Clark, Robinson and the Highlander and SCLC staff as well as the women's relationship with their students. Her work does not seek to provide an in-depth,

---

<sup>6</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller review of the literature surrounding women and organizing theory, see Chapter 1 of Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> John Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989). While Aimee Isgrig Horton was the second wife of Myles Horton, the school's founder, her book was originally written as her doctoral thesis and makes extensive use of archival material on Highlander. Other books about the school were either co-authored by Myles Horton or are explicitly biased towards him.

sustained analysis of how these dynamics came into play specifically during the formation of the citizenship education program.<sup>9</sup>

### Methodology

While historians have established a solid narrative of the history of Highlander and have identified various indicators, such as relationship to dress, sexuality, and the politics of respectability to discuss the role of gender in other areas of the civil rights movement, these indicators have not yet been examined in the specific context of citizenship education. Focusing on the program's formation at Highlander will be particularly important for discussing the relationship between gender and the development of the project's overarching mission. Many accounts of the movement reference the citizenship education program only after its transfer to the SCLC, at which point it became more standardized. I will analyze materials available at the Wisconsin Historical Society such as oral histories, Highlander staff correspondence, audio recordings of workshops and planning meetings, and the school's publicity material, as well as the published autobiographies of Septima Clark.

In Chapter 1, I explain how Highlander's work with the labor movement intersected with Septima Clark's previous experience on Johns Island to produce the citizenship school project. In Chapter 2, I elaborate on Clark and Robinson's use of listening to create an experience-based citizenship curriculum. In Chapter 3, I look more closely at the complex ways gendered understandings of leadership affected Clark's local organizing and her personal life. In Chapter 4, I analyze how the politics of respectability and the Cold War context restricted women's organizing differently at Highlander and the SCLC. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss how Clark and Robinson navigated structural sexism within both civil rights organizations.

---

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

## Chapter 1: Roots

### Highlander's Origins in the Labor Movement

Highlander's roots in the labor movement helped the school develop a structure and culture that would be receptive to the work and influence of Bernice Robinson and Septima Clark. In 1932, white Tennessee native Myles Horton and southern teacher and activist Don West leased land in Monteagle, Grundy County, Tennessee to found a school with a curriculum based on the needs of its students: "mountaineers" and industrial workers, men and women, black and white.<sup>10</sup> In Horton's words, the school was to serve as a "stopping place for traveling liberals and a meeting place for southern radicals" in addition to helping its students "take their place intelligently in the changing world."<sup>11</sup> In response to the region's poverty and lack of labor organization, Highlander's stated goal was "to educate rural and industrial leaders for a new social order," a reflection of the socialist educational philosophies of both West and Horton as well as of the mission of the school to unite workers of different backgrounds according to their mutual interests.<sup>12</sup> The school saw its role in the communities in which it operated as temporary, and Highlander staff had succeeded if they were able to leave behind a functioning, self-sufficient community organization. Although this goal was not always achievable, it spoke to the overall mentality with which Highlander members approached their work and fundamentally influenced their relationships to the people with whom they were working. Additionally, while Highlander viewed racism as an artificial barrier to solidarity between white and black workers

---

<sup>10</sup> John Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-21.

and was always integrated in theory, the staff during this period was primarily white, and the school did not have its first significantly integrated training session until the 1940s.<sup>13</sup>

For the first few years after its founding, Highlander staff worked to build connections with individuals and nearby labor campaigns and organizations through meetings with community members and labor activists. They provided logistical and educational support to local and regional strikes and ran workshops to facilitate the formation of organized labor unions.<sup>14</sup> In the later 1930s, the school collaborated frequently with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in its organizing projects, but by the end of the 1940's the relationship between the unions and the school was almost completely severed. Highlander remained focused on its goal of racially integrated education, community support and systematic change, while the CIO, still wary of integration, pursued what Highlander considered to be bread-and-butter issues such as raising wages and regulating working hours.<sup>15</sup> While the school did not meet its goals with regards to labor organizing, this period of trial and error gave Highlander members invaluable experience navigating the needs of different communities and making connections between those needs and larger political issues.

During this period, white women were reasonably well represented on the small Highlander staff. Horton's wife Zilphia headed the school's music and theater program, which she promoted both as a form of recreation and as an educational tool to teach about labor organizing. Zilphia brought copies of song lyrics to protests and encouraged students to write and edit songs they already knew.<sup>16</sup> While women staff members organized labor workshops

---

<sup>13</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 220.

<sup>14</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 18-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-86.

<sup>16</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 117-121.

and actions, these events were primarily attended by men.<sup>17</sup> Community women, meanwhile, benefited from and shaped the school's community support and cultural programs designed to help people remedy issues in their daily lives.<sup>18</sup>

The school's staff determined their programming and the issues they chose to confront according to the changing economic and political conditions of the region and the resulting problems people brought up in workshops. Highlander's focus on racial integration, creating local leaders, and building programs based on the needs and cultures of the local communities meant that when civil rights activities picked up around the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*—the case that legally desegregated the public school system in 1954—the school was well situated to support the growing movement and the women carrying it forward.

At first, Highlander offered its premises as a place to hold workshops for both black and white activists about how to push compliance with desegregation requirements surrounding the release of the *Brown* decision. Rosa Parks attended a workshop at Highlander shortly before refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man—an action that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott—and eventually a large integrated group of students who would soon form SNCC first came together at Highlander during the 1960 wave of lunch counter sit-ins to discuss student activism.<sup>19</sup> Highlander was one of the only places in the South where organizers could hold integrated meetings, a transformative experience for many.

Building on the model developed during the school's labor years, Highlander structured its civil rights workshops to help participants solve problems collectively by sharing techniques developed in their respective communities. From the start, traditional hierarchies that correlated hierarchical leadership with mission-building expertise served little function in this context, as

---

<sup>17</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 70-73.

<sup>18</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 290-291.

the bottom-up process through which Highlander determined its relationship to the growing movement involved locating, supporting and working with people who were already active in some capacity. The nature of Highlander's involvement with the civil rights movement inevitably meant that a more diverse group of people, including many more women, passed through its workshops, sharing their ideas and perspectives and contributing to the collective experience of the attendees.

### The Formation of the Citizenship School Program

At a 1954 residency workshop, Esau Jenkins, a community leader on Johns Island in South Carolina, raised the issue of literacy requirements as a barrier to voter registration for illiterate African Americans.<sup>20</sup> In his 1948 *Brown v. Baskin* decision, Federal Judge J. Waites Waring had decisively struck down all attempts to maintain the unconstitutional white primary in South Carolina, ruling that black residents must be able to register and vote in the Democratic primary elections as well as in the general election.<sup>21</sup> The decision created a new opportunity for black South Carolinians to influence politics, since the contest for the Democratic nomination decided the election in the solidly Democratic state. However, as part of a resistance campaign against this potential new influx of black voters, the state began more consistently enforcing its literacy requirements for registration. Hopeful voters were required to read and interpret a portion of the state constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar. Esau Jenkins originally countered this restriction by teaching people to memorize the pertinent portion of the constitution on the bus ride on the way to register at the urging of Annie Wine, an illiterate Johns Island resident who wanted to vote.<sup>22</sup> Annie Wine and others expressed a desire to learn further and

---

<sup>20</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 216.

<sup>21</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 191.

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline A. Rouse, "We Seek to Know...in Order to Speak the Truth: Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent—Septima Clark and Participatory Leadership" in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P.

more and more residents wanted to vote. In November 1954, after attending a Highlander workshop at the urging of Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins hosted Zilphia Horton at his family's home on Johns Island to discuss instituting a more sustainable solution. Eventually, Highlander staff members Myles Horton and Septima Clark teamed up with Jenkins to craft a systematic education program through Highlander that would facilitate increased registration.<sup>23</sup>

Given Highlander's background using adult education as a tool of social change, the partnership was natural. The program soon got started under the direction of Septima Clark, Highlander staff member and soon-to-be director of education, who had taught on Johns Island in the past and was therefore the perfect person to work on crafting an educational outreach program. Clark served as the program's main architect as well as its administrator in many of the areas where it eventually spread.

#### A Bridge Leader on Johns Island

By the time she joined the Highlander staff, Clark already had extensive experience organizing through women's clubs and had been teaching since she was a teenager. She had first arrived on Johns Island in 1916 to teach public school. In her time there, she gained a deep understanding of how the exploitation of black tenant farmers through the demands of their contracts affected the daily lives of families. In the various biographical and oral accounts of her Highlander experience, Clark emphasized the concrete conditions of life on Johns Island, detailing the knowledge she had eventually used to shape the citizenship education program. In a 1981 interview, she recounted that tenant farmer contracts bound entire families to work for a specific cotton planter:

---

Franklin, eds, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 105-106.

<sup>23</sup>Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 215-218.

The older children didn't come to school until the harvest was over. They came in the last of November to the last of February. When it was time to put cotton in the field again, they had to go. See, their father had made an X and signed away their rights. And that's why we had so many babies die too, because the mothers had these children, and she didn't stay but two or three days in the house afterwards...But you know, the same thing happened up in the mountains, up there at Monteagle, Tennessee.<sup>24</sup>

Her description of the harsh and controlling terms of farming contracts spoke directly to the problems of illiteracy and the poverty of tenant farming that characterized the island. Children often had to walk up to ten miles per day to get to school, and could not come at all during the harvesting season unless they were too young to work. In her 1962 autobiography, published just after her move to the SCLC, Clark explained, "On rainy days when no work could be done in the fields we would have a large attendance. But if by noon the sun came out, the plantation overseer would ride up to school and call for the tenants' children." Schools were overcrowded and underfunded, and attendance was very irregular.<sup>25</sup> Sanitation was limited and infant mortality was high. Furthermore, "When the crops were short or failed, economic disaster heightened the suffering."<sup>26</sup> Few black residents of the islands "entertained any idea of voting..."<sup>27</sup> Clark also describes how the island's geographical isolation meant that the residents were even more disconnected from public service providers than mainland blacks. Secret fraternal organizations, which Clark learned about when members asked her for help writing speeches, constituted practically the only community organizations to be found on the island.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Septima P. Clark, interview by Peter H. Wood, February 3, 1981, transcript, box 1, folder 30, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, p. 14. Monteagle was the site of Highlander's residence programs. The school engaged with its surrounding communities in addition to the running its extension program on the Sea Islands.

<sup>25</sup> Septima Poinsette Clark with LeGette Blythe, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

Clark's familiarity with the lifestyle and culture of the Charleston area and her understanding of the people with whom Highlander worked informed her own organizing style: "I've been a poverty-stricken, low-income person, and I know how to work with them."<sup>29</sup> Through her work at Highlander, Clark combined Robnett's definition of a "bridge leader" with Gore's description of women who articulated activist principles. She helped people bridge the connections between their poverty and larger political problems and in doing so ensured that the trajectory of the program would be in line with developments on the ground in different communities, consistent with her own educational philosophy. When she returned to Johns Island in 1957 to oversee the first citizenship school, she worked with an acute awareness of issues of class born of her own personal background as well as her past experience on the island. Clark claimed that her firsthand knowledge of Charleston and Johns Island gave her a greater ability to create an effective program specifically for the people of the region. She knew that if they were to succeed, the citizenship schools needed to take into account these realities of the life of Johns Island residents. For example, the organizers would often recruit teenage girls to watch the children of older students who would not otherwise have been able to come to classes.<sup>30</sup> Through the program, these teenagers also learned to crochet, making clothing that would give them a degree of economic independence.<sup>31</sup> Consistent with this goal of confronting poverty on the island, the building that housed the school also housed a new community store to provide residents with easier access to the essentials of daily life. Esau Jenkins believed these activities were essential to the citizenship program because people were able to keep money within the

---

<sup>29</sup> Septima Poinsette Clark, interview by Eugene Walker, July 30, 1976, transcribed by Jean Houston for the Southern Oral History Project, box 1, folder 29, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, interview by Wood, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

community by doing business with each other.<sup>32</sup> Economic and practical education proved very attractive to students. In a conversation with Jenkins, Myles Horton, Septima Clark, and a group of older women and high school students who had been involved with the schools, students cited the literacy education as well as the sewing and Bernice Robinson's lessons about personal finance as reasons people came to school.<sup>33</sup> Literacy in this context included not just reading and writing but also financial and political literacy. In training sessions, Clark emphasized that teachers had to consider the "full" person, "not just one part of him, because until we can get a person participating as a full person, then we don't really have a full citizen."<sup>34</sup> This personalized approach to citizenship education took into account the specific economic needs of women and their families and saw serving those needs as a key aspect of creating citizens. While in concrete terms the citizenship classes sought mainly to increase the number of registered black voters, Clark and Robinson worked based on a broad definition of literacy which Clark saw as a path to "liberation" and without which people were unlikely to see voting as a worthwhile activity.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Multiple speakers, "Citizenship Program," 1955, 1957, audiocassette UC515A/44, 28:45. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Septima Clark, "Citizens Workshop," undated, audiocassette UC515A/58, 27:25, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>35</sup> Rouse, "We Seek to Know," 112-113.

## Chapter 2: The Listening Process

### ‘We Talked So Loud:’ Septima Gets Myles to Listen

Clark strongly believed in the philosophy of education as liberation and worked hard to incorporate the everyday needs of the people Highlander served into the school’s programs through careful listening. However, she recalled that even Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, was often impatient in his dealings with potential students for the school’s educational outreach programs. She remembered, “Myles couldn’t listen to people. . . he’d want you to get to the point right now. . . And so I told him, I said, ‘You will never be able to organize. . .if you can’t sit down and listen to that man tell you the night that their calf was born, such-and-such a thing.’”<sup>36</sup> Apparently, lack of patience and inability to listen was a characteristic Clark “found to be true with most of the men.”<sup>37</sup> Both she and Robinson knew listening to stories about farming was not a waste of time. Robinson would soon use them to form the basis of the citizenship education curriculum. As Myles Horton and the Highlander staff worked with Clark and Jenkins to apply the Highlander pedagogy to Johns Island, Clark made sure they understood her perspective on tactics and the need to create programs that responded to the students’ problems. She emphasized the importance of listening when she and Myles Horton first discussed the possibility of starting citizenship education workshops:

Myles and I considered the thing. We talked—Myles talked so loud. . .and I was trying to tell him what I felt we needed to do, because nobody he had sent into those sections right around there could work with those people. . .But I went piece by piece. I said we better start with a night where they give their input and tell us what they want. And then the next meeting, where they would say how you can go about getting what you would like to have. We talked so loud we had everybody on that plane listening to us—a plane full of people. And when I went back to Highlander, that night I started, sitting down and

---

<sup>36</sup> Septima Poinsette Clark, interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, July 25, 1976, transcript, Southern Oral History Project and Documenting the American South Project (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1976), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0016/menu.html>, p.86-87.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p.13-14.

writing out “Education for Citizenship.” I did that, and Alice Cobb was there with us then, and Alice would type up everything that I’d say, and then Myles would come in and we’d consider it.<sup>38</sup>

Although she had to work to assert herself in the conversation, her opinions eventually became policy. Despite Myles’ strong personality, Septima is clear that they were both speaking loudly. Clark made sure her voice was heard throughout the process, from the first discussion of the project to the drafting of the proposal.

Furthermore, as we can see from her vision for the opening workshops of a hypothetical citizenship school, Clark understood the value of listening not only between herself and Myles Horton but also between the Highlander staff and their prospective students. The priorities Clark articulated in this conversation related directly to her ability to serve as a bridge leader. Belinda Robnett defines a bridge leader as someone who was “able to cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents.” In doing so, they served as “the stepping stones necessary for potential constituents and adherents to cross formidable barriers between their personal lives and the political life of civil rights movement organizations.”<sup>39</sup> Many bridge leaders were women who used their situation within the social structure as local figures and mothers to communicate effectively with multiple different sectors of the community. As organizers, they were then able to use these skills that they had acquired in part because of gendered understandings of the role of women to facilitate grassroots organizing around local issues. This ability was important in citizenship education because creating a program that would lead to greater political participation required helping people become citizens not just in terms of voting but also with respect to the institutions and problems they might encounter in their daily lives. The kind of education Clark

---

<sup>38</sup> Clark, interview by Wood, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 19.

conceptualized sought to do just that. Crafting the program was a back and forth process between her and Myles, and she emphasized that listening was an essential structural component. The progression of the planning process shows that Clark's role in the project was more than just managerial, as administrative work required thinking about how the program's application would reflect its overall philosophy, which Clark's positioning as a bridge leader allowed her to influence. As a result, the program's structural details, from the moment the staff members arrived in a town to the method for determining the curriculum, reflected an understanding of the tensions surrounding race and class that Clark had accrued because of her gender.

#### 'A Good Ear:' Bernice Robinson and the Citizenship Curriculum

This kind of sensitivity to the realities of poverty and segregation would prove key to developing and carrying out the citizenship school program, and it was a perspective that Bernice Robinson, Clark's cousin and the first citizenship school teacher, understood well. Like Clark, Robinson came to Highlander with a variety of experiences that informed her work at the school. Speaking later on about her childhood in Charleston, Robinson remembered sharing food with poor classmates, bringing them home to her house to bathe and feed them. While her family did not have much money, her father always shared with those who had even less, especially around the holidays. Her parents also instilled in her a sense of pride in her race. Her father would always refer to white men by their names, never calling them "mister." He also never let his sons work as errand boys for white stores, instead having them learn skills that would allow them to be independent. Bernice was taught to be independent as well. She did work around the house, and she understood why her mother never let her perform domestic work for white

families, in part out of fear of sexual violence from white men: “I know that my mother’s mind was dealing with the slavery issue.”<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, Robinson understood how her education, which she valued highly, had nevertheless been shaped largely by factors out of her control:

Of course, *all* of what was taught was dictated by the white Charleston School Board. They set the curriculum. They sent you the books. And all our books were used books because when they got too old for the white schools, they were shipped over to our schools. It was definitely dictated by the school board. No ifs, ands, and buts about that! They ruled it. All the superintendents were white. We had no choice.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the curriculum made no mention of black leaders, and Bernice knew that her cousin Septima had been reprimanded by her school’s principal after trying to teach black history to her public school students.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, Robinson later spent time in New York City, first alone and later with her daughter after her divorce. She held jobs in factories, for the government, and with the campaign of a black politician, all while learning to be a beautician and taking advantage of the music of the city. She eventually returned to Charleston, opened up a beauty shop and got involved with the NAACP. By the early 1950s she was heavily involved in the movement, running NAACP meetings and other civil rights activities out of the salon that made her economically independent from whites and therefore safe from economic reprisals for her civil rights work. When she first came to Highlander at the urging of her cousin Septima, the school’s integrated structure was no shock to her because of her time in New York. At the same time, she was well aware of the realities of life for the black population of the Charleston area, including the deficiencies of the education that harmed black communities.

---

<sup>40</sup> Bernice Robinson, interview by Sue Thrasher and Eliot Wigginton, November 9, 1980, transcript, box 2, folders 34-45, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, no page numbers.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Robinson brought all this background to Highlander as the first citizenship school instructor, a role she hesitated to fill because of her lack of teaching experience, despite her education, organizing experience and travels. Myles and Septima had to cajole her into taking on the job. On the first day of class, Robinson informed the students that she was not a teacher; instead, they were all going to “learn together.” She told them, “I’m going to teach you some things and you’re going to teach me some things.”<sup>43</sup> From the start, she knew she needed to base the program on the needs and knowledge of the students themselves. Her background came to be a major asset in this respect. The ability to listen that Clark brought to Highlander as a teacher, Robinson had developed in her beauty shop. Robinson would later claim that beauticians had to have a “good ear.” She explained, “When you’re a beautician, you’re everything. You preach to them. You listen to them. You listen to their problems. . . They’re going to tell you all of their life stories.”<sup>44</sup> As Charron, Clark’s biographer, explains, “Black beauticians and their customers occupied a female-centered space wherein the value of listening was appreciated.”<sup>45</sup> Highlander tried to create similar a similar atmosphere in its workshops by recognizing the validity and importance of people’s lived experiences to make the school’s work relevant to their lives. Once Robinson joined the Highlander staff to work on the citizenship schools, she also helped with the school’s residence workshops. She observed that one of the most valuable aspects of the workshops was the ability of organizers to create comfortable, collaborative spaces in which to encourage discussion among participants about what they wanted to change in their communities: “whatever was on your mind, you could say it.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Lucy Massie Phenix and Veronica Selver (Harrington Park, NJ: Millenium Zero, 2011), DVD.

<sup>44</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 250.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Phenix and Selver.

On Johns Island, Robinson used the corollary processes of listening and fostering vocal participation to develop the citizenship curriculum and program structure. For example, reflecting on the beginning of the program, Robinson pointed out that the school needed to take into account the farming schedule of the residents of John's Island. School could only take place in the three-month off-season from December to February in which farm owners would not need to call students away from classes to harvest crops.<sup>47</sup> When the first class of students told Robinson they wanted to learn how to order from catalogs and fill out money orders, she incorporated these documents into her class materials. Bernice reported, "We have to give them some arithmetic. The men are particularly interested in figures."<sup>48</sup> She brought in catalog order forms and grocery store ads to practice math. Students considered questions such as the amount of gas it took to drive to Charleston or the materials necessary to put up a fence.<sup>49</sup> For one class, she brought in blank checks and a banker who explained how to fill them out so as to avoid theft after a student complained someone had withdrawn money from her account.<sup>50</sup> Clark later remembered, "Bernice and her students would tell stories about the things they had to deal with every day—about growing vegetables, plowing the land, digging up potatoes. Then they would write down these stories and read them back. Any word they stumbled over, Bernice would use in the spelling lesson."<sup>51</sup> Rather than try to force onto her students the standardized grade school materials she had brought with her the first day, Robinson used the skills she had acquired through her interactions with women to craft a curriculum that would most effectively contribute to the citizenship literacy of her students. This process meant that Robinson's work was more

---

<sup>47</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Phenix and Selver.

<sup>48</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 223-224.

<sup>49</sup> Rouse, "We Seek to Know," 109.

<sup>50</sup> Septima Poinsette Clark and Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, Calif.: Wild Trees Press, 1986), 64.

<sup>51</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 91.

than simply an extension of the vision of Horton or even Clark. Like Clark, through her organizing and teaching work Robinson directly influenced the important details of what community-based literacy education actually looked like on the ground as Highlander gave her the freedom to teach as she saw fit based on her own skills and experience.

Robinson was therefore an important contributor to the content and character of the program that was so essential to the work of the civil rights movement. She recalled that everyone who learned to read went on to vote and that many communities requested citizenship schools once the pilot program on Johns Island proved successful. Andrew Young, who would run the program during its time at the SCLC after 1961, later acknowledged citizenship education “as the base on which the whole civil rights movement was built” for the large numbers of black voters it recruited.<sup>52</sup> As Robinson explained, the citizenship curriculum played a major role in the spread of civil rights activism as it helped regular people become aware of the power they had to make changes at both the local and national levels.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Robnett, *How Long?*, 94.

<sup>53</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Phenix and Selver.

### Chapter 3: Leadership in a Gendered Context

#### ‘A Man to Represent You:’ Defining Leadership in Local Terms

The ability to understand and help students recognize the causes behind the difficulties they faced was key to creating leaders, especially as Highlander expanded the program after its successful start on Johns Island and no longer oversaw every school consistently. Highlander activists sought to encourage local initiative by helping people take advantage of the rights and privileges of citizenship, including but not limited to voting. Bernice Robinson recalled that sometimes when they went to a new place to start a school and talk about voter registration, people were hesitant to act because they had no one to guide them. Robinson would convince the students that they could be leaders by pointing out that they already saw and knew the problems the community faced.<sup>54</sup> Their own ability to articulate their experiences qualified them to act. Whenever Highlander representatives went to a place that did not already have a community aid organization, the staff would organize the students of the first literacy class into one so that there would be some continuity of grassroots activism and learning when the Highlander staff left.

However, this task meant appealing to the men of the island. Many people involved in the civil rights movement defined citizenship and personhood in terms of masculinity in an effort to resist the emasculating language and violence of racism which attempted to deny black men their adult manhood. An observer of the Montgomery bus boycott remarked that the day of Rosa Parks’ arrest marked a transition from boy to man for many: “The white man knew how to handle the boy...But he didn’t know how to handle this man.”<sup>55</sup> The residents of Johns Island might not have been very connected to the national movement given their geographic isolation,

---

<sup>54</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Phenix and Selver.

<sup>55</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 212.

but the figure of the local male leader that was powerful in so many southern communities resonated on Johns Island as well. Clark usually tried to organize by locating and supporting vocal community leaders people already looked up to, often men. As a result, she frequently employed male-oriented language similar to that of the national movement while recruiting people to participate in the program.<sup>56</sup> Dayo Gore describes this contradiction that black women activists often faced in her account of the 1951 campaign to free Rosa Lee Ingram, a black women sentenced to death for killing a white male aggressor. Left wing activists mobilizing around the issue focused on Ingram's role as a mother in order to highlight the injustice perpetrated against her. According to Gore, the activists'

rhetoric revealed a strategic choice by black women radicals to engage dominant discourses around American womanhood and to redeploy them in the service of often demeaned and excluded black women. In one respect, this represented a savvy political move. . . .the strategy successfully brought attention to Mrs. Ingram's plight and especially helped to galvanize black communities invested in defending black womanhood. Yet, from another perspective, the persistent emphasis on womanhood and motherhood worked to reinforce limited gender roles for both black and white women and, in the context of radical organizing, relegated black women's leadership to the narrowly defined terrain of "women's issues."<sup>57</sup>

Septima Clark was not explicitly defending black womanhood, nor was she dealing with problems considered to be "women's issues," but her use of gendered language reflected constraints of a similar nature, as facilitating the creation of local peer leadership required speaking a locality-specific gendered language.

The same impulse that led local men to form the fraternal societies Clark noticed while teaching on Johns Island could be harnessed to create local political leaders. Clark took the language of religious brotherly love and masculine empowerment popularized by the mainstream movement and put it into the context of life on the Sea Islands to convince people to come to

---

<sup>56</sup> Septima Clark, "Highlander Report," 1959, audiocassette UC807A/12, 42:15, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>57</sup> Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 83.

Highlander workshops and take on the task of starting citizenship schools. In a recruitment presentation at a church on Johns Island she asked the congregation to send “a man to represent you” at a Highlander workshop who could then bring back what he learned to his community. At the workshop, she explained, they would discuss the “dignity of man and the right of each individual to a good life [that] comes from our Christian gospel” as well as the “teaching of Jesus that all men are brothers...”<sup>58</sup> This gendered understanding of empowerment was widespread and its strength dictated that Clark use its accompanying language, defining leadership in terms of the “dignity of man” and brotherhood, in order to encourage local action. The very sensitivity to customs and culture that made Clark’s organizing so effective often required her to speak in terms that did not encompass her personal experiences of activism.

Clark, who had gotten her start as an activist working through women’s clubs, knew that women could be local leaders and that the participation of women in any capacity was good for the program. She both believed in the elevation of black women and was familiar with the various forms black femininity could take depending on class.<sup>59</sup> Women from Johns Island did attend Highlander workshops and were very active in the citizenship education program, especially as students. Before, “women didn’t speak on the island...they fanned the flies and waited until the men said things.”<sup>60</sup> Clark would later write that “our experiment has proven that

---

<sup>58</sup> Septima Clark, “Recording of music and a historical presentation,” 1954 or 1955, audiocassette UC807A/4, 4:35, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>59</sup> Charron, Clark’s biographer, writes “As an activist educator and clubwoman, she [Clark] had devoted much of her attention to school and health issues affecting the black community while remaining equally concerned with mentoring young black women and garnering respect for black womanhood. As an organizer of several HFS-sponsored workshops in 1955 and 1956, she had incorporated affordable housing and consumer cooperatives into her agenda. Clark had a broad definition of ‘citizenship education,’ augmented by her involvement with Highlander but firmly rooted in southern black women’s activist organizational culture.” Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 247-248.

<sup>60</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 260.

a housewife, a beautician, a seamstress, a businesswoman or woman, with high school education or less formal training can be used to teach or supervise the adult education program.”<sup>61</sup> Clark thought getting women to participate assertively was one of the biggest achievements of the education program in the Sea Islands. At the same time, she knew she had to be patient as the success of the program slowly led to increased women’s participation even as the language many organizers used to recruit reinforced some of the customs that were holding women back in the first place.

#### ‘A Man Wouldn’t Put Up With It:’ The Personal Lives of Women Activists

The contradictions of navigating understandings of leadership as a male quality affected the personal lives of women activists as well. Movement involvement put a strain on all civil rights activists, but for women the tension between personal and public life was particularly strong. Cynthia Griggs Fleming describes how SNCC activist Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, despite gaining fame among the SNCC community for her powerful leadership and activism, was and had always been very private about her personal life.<sup>62</sup> Robinson as well as other SNCC activists felt that the men in the organization did not see strong leadership and femininity as compatible. Robinson enjoyed being a wife and a mother as well as an activist, and she struggled to fulfill these roles without letting them interfere with each other.<sup>63</sup> Her colleague Cynthia Washington later reflected, “Our skills and abilities were recognized and respected, but that seemed to place us in some other category than female.”<sup>64</sup> Septima Clark experienced a similar issue. She felt that her lifestyle as an outspoken activist would not have been compatible

---

<sup>61</sup> Septima Clark, memo, 1956?, box 9, folder 12, Administrative Correspondence: Clark, Septima (1954-66), Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>62</sup> Fleming, “More Than a Lady,” 553.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 560.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.

with married life. In 1920, Septima had married Nerie Clark, a sailor. They had two children, the first of which died as an infant. Not long after, Nerie died as well of kidney failure. Clark was very dedicated to her son and felt great “sorrow” at having to leave him with his grandmother most of the time while she worked.<sup>65</sup> She never remarried, in part because she felt that “no man could treat this other man’s child right.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally, Clark suspected that a husband would have gotten in the way of her work:

I’m very sure that a man wouldn’t put up with it. See, the way I had to go, sometimes I made three cities in a day, working for the SCLC and Highlander Folk School. Maybe I’d speak in Seattle this morning, and I’ll hop a plane and I’d get to Calgary, and I’ll hop another plane and I’d go to Alberta. A man wouldn’t hardly put...up with that. I didn’t get back here but just around Christmas, maybe I’d have one or two days. I was gone all the time.<sup>67</sup>

She had a male friend in New York once, but he got jealous when Clark interacted with other men and Clark decided he was not for her. In general, she knew that she just “never could take a lot of foolishness off a man.”<sup>68</sup> Clark’s activist role and the strong personality she associated with it interfered with her more stereotypically feminine roles and interactions.

Nevertheless, Clark’s ability to negotiate between the gender politics of the region and her own beliefs is evident throughout her work with the citizenship schools and reflected her complicated relationship to Highlander’s organizational philosophy. Clark was not completely free to work and live as she wanted, but neither was she reduced to purely administrative tasks. As she and Robinson worked on the Johns Island pilot program and other Sea Islands projects, they constantly made decisions about how to develop the program based on their own knowledge and the feedback they got from their students. In doing so, they were able to shape how local

---

<sup>65</sup> Clark, *Ready from Within*, 114.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-114.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, interview by Hall, p. 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

gender politics figured into the development of Highlander's citizenship education pedagogy, even if they could not ignore those politics completely.

## Chapter 4: The Politics of Respectability

‘We Didn’t Bother About Dressing at Highlander:’ Visual Presentation

Gender politics restricted women’s activism on multiple levels, not just in localized interactions. Historians have used the phrase the “politics of respectability” to describe the standards of morality by which the general public scrutinized women both on the community level and through the national media. Septima Clark would later reflect that much of the SCLC staff tended to see women as “sex symbols” who “had no contribution to make.”<sup>69</sup> Danielle McGuire explains how this issue affected women activists through the example of Rosa Parks, who came to symbolize “middle-class decorum” and respectability, an important counter message to the propaganda of segregationists working to prevent integration after *Brown* by spreading fears of interracial sex.<sup>70</sup> These politics were one of the reasons women rarely took on highly publicized leadership roles. Visible women could be a liability to civil rights organizations whose goal was to convince the nation that segregation prevented respectable, morally upstanding black Americans from taking part in democracy.

In many cases, women were left with the difficult task of preempting accusations of communist subversion not through words but through the presentation of their own bodies. The politics of respectability inherently dictated a specific politics of dress as clothing took on a complicated and contested meaning among different civil rights activists. Many civil rights organizations responded by instructing their members to dress “modestly, neatly. . .as if you were going to church.”<sup>71</sup> Tanisha Ford explains that while SCLC activists dressed modestly, SNCC activists reacted to this standard by wearing denim in an attempt to overcome divisive

---

<sup>69</sup> Clark, *Ready from Within*, 77.

<sup>70</sup> McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 76.

<sup>71</sup> Ford, “SNCC Women,” 629.

class differences in the black community, and for women, “to desexualize their bodies, not only to protect themselves from sexual assault, but also to blur prescribed gender roles and notions of feminine propriety.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the clothing of “propriety” was impractical for SNCC’s direct action tactics, door-to-door canvassing and demonstrations.<sup>73</sup> Although SNCC women took the opposite approach to that of the SCLC, each decision represented a public interaction in which dress was a political tool.

Highlander’s relationship to dress differed from that of other civil rights organizations in ways that had important ramifications for its women organizers. The focus of Highlander’s activism meant that media coverage of the school tended to be local and regional, not national. Highlander activities did not aspire to political symbolism, so reliance on traditional gender presentation, especially of women, would not have been such a constant necessity. Clark recalled with amusement: “We didn’t bother about dressing at Highlander.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, the staff members wore what they wished or whatever they had. Clark’s explanation that no one even “bothered” with clothing suggests that the usefulness of female activists at Highlander was generally not a function of their presentation. Instead, clothing served a much more practical role in Highlander programs: women learned to make clothing in order to supplement their own scarce wardrobes. At the request of students, sewing, crocheting and making clothes were incorporated into the general curriculum and were very popular in the largely female student community.<sup>75</sup> The ability to make clothing gave women a degree of economic independence.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ford, “SNCC Women,” 627.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 639

<sup>74</sup> Clark, interview by Hall, p.107.

<sup>75</sup> Multiple speakers, “Broadcast material on the Highlander Story,” 1960, audiocassette UC515A/120, 29:00, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Furthermore, being able to wear clothing they had made themselves meant that women had some control over the physical presentation of their own bodies, a form of empowerment.

It was only when Highlander staff were physically removed from their local context that presentation became relevant in a symbolic way. Clark recounted that a visiting activist coming to Highlander for a workshop once brought her some dresses because she thought Clark looked “tacky,” and how activists from New York wanted her to dress up and wear an expensive hat to meet with Mrs. King, an extravagance Clark thought excessive.<sup>76</sup> These women were reading into Clark’s clothing their own judgment as well as the judgment they feared from others. The ability to properly present one’s own body was seen as an indicator of an activist’s competence and propriety. Putting Clark in a fancy hat she insisted she never would have bought on her own represented an attempt to translate her qualifications into the language of the northern middle class, which much of the movement focused on speaking.

This short anecdote is telling in the context of a movement in which appearance came attached with a complex set of politics. Clothing was irrelevant to the role of being purely an organizer; when Clark went to New York, however, she travelled, spoke and socialized as a representative of the southern movement. While dressing up for an important meeting is not unusual, doing so was rarely a requisite of Clark’s job description at Highlander. When the main project was to teach people to work and organize independently, no individual school relied on or received large-scale media attention and there was less need to conform to white middle class standards of dress and respectability. In fact, fancy clothing would have impeded the ability of Highlander staff to organize in poor communities and would have been unattainable for many of the locals whom Highlander trained to be teachers. While Highlander workers, especially Myles Horton, did often travel representing the school, the politics of respectability were overall less

---

<sup>76</sup> Clark, interview by Hall, p. 104.

restrictive in the context of the citizenship education program because the success of the classes themselves depended on local organizing and not the approval of outsiders.

‘Champions of Democracy:’ Highlander’s Public Relations

One significant exception to this rule was the need for financial support. When in later years Bernice Robinson took on much of the responsibility of running the citizenship education program, Clark devoted a significant amount of time to fundraising for Highlander, reaching out to mostly to white northern audiences. Clark was well versed in the politics of respectability of both the black and white middle class in addition to the gendered divisions of the residents of Charleston and the Sea Islands. Although conforming to Cold War sexual politics of respectability was often incompatible with assertive, public, vocalized activism for women, Charron explains how during her northern speaking tours, “To audiences of mostly white donors, she [Clark] used her speech *and* her manner to represent the southern civil rights movement as dignified, respectable, and just.”<sup>77</sup>

On the one hand, an opinionated and outspoken Clark clearly did have to conform to these expectations of respectable femininity in both her fundraising and general advertising work for Highlander to make sure to speak in terms that would resonate with potential donors. While doing so usually meant using male-centered language, she retained her voice by explaining Highlander’s work and philosophy through personal narratives of her experiences on Johns Island. In a 1959 letter soliciting donations for Highlander, Clark reminded her readers:

As you well know, there are two Souths. There is the soul-sick South of the Ku Klux Klan, of the White Citizens Councils who try to bolster segregation with bogus anthropology and illiterate religion, of Governor Faubus who identifies desegregation with communism and thus maligns every southerner of goodwill who works for a law-abiding, more democratic South. But there is also the South of Martin Luther King and Asbury Howard, of brave educators (white and Negro) who have risked their careers and

---

<sup>77</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 265. (Italics mine.)

their security for their principles. There is the South of the ministers and rabbis who have put their faith into action at great cost.<sup>78</sup>

Clark did not favor the leadership style of many male religious leaders but invoked it for its symbolic power which could put her work into a respectable context and generate much needed funding for Highlander's rapidly expanding project. Later in the letter Clark turned to telling of her work at Highlander, although she deemphasized her own role somewhat, instead citing the Memphis Commercial Appeal when they deemed Myles Horton "one of the South's most controversial white men who openly advocates and works for racial integration at all levels."<sup>79</sup> At the end of the letter, she once again asked her reader to help support "the scores of brave southerners who are leading the fight for justice and better race relations..."<sup>80</sup> The "brave southerners" she has described are almost entirely men, but she includes herself in this group as well.

An undated Highlander promotional publication by Septima Clark entitled "Champions of Democracy" gives us a fuller example of the gendered narrative Clark created of the movement and her role in it. She begins with her own background and continues by telling the story of the children and adults she had taught in the past and in her role at Highlander: "I am a Negro. Born black in a white man's land. My name is Septima Clark. I am a teacher. I have spent nearly all my adult life teaching citizenship to children who aren't really citizens."<sup>81</sup> She cites the fathers and brothers who shed blood and died in American wars as evidence of how deserving her students are of rights, employing traditional metrics of masculinity in her definition of citizenship. Clark also reminded her readers that she could no longer teach these

---

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Septima Clark, May 1959, box 9, folder 12, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Septima Clark, "Champions of Democracy," undated, box 84, folder 6, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

children because she had been fired from her teaching job precisely for advocating for civil rights. Still, “we must never grow bitter, ours is a struggle for a better, more united America.”<sup>82</sup> She left herself entirely out of the narrative about voter registration on Johns Island, which she credited entirely to Esau Jenkins. Instead, she emphasized the power that came with claiming one’s citizenship rights: “School boards listen to voters, sheriffs don’t pistol-whip voters, judges don’t railroad voters.”<sup>83</sup> Her description of the Rosa Parks episode is perhaps most telling in terms of the way she employed gendered stereotypes to associate Highlander’s work with national understandings of the civil rights movement:

In December, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks had been shoved just about as far as she could go. In Montgomery, Alabama, the pretty seamstress had known a lifetime of standing, standing regardless of how long she had worked or how tired she was, standing, even when there were empty seats in the white section of the bus.

After sewing all day long on a heavy winter coat for a society woman, Rosa decided she had stood long enough. . . .Forty thousand men and women walk and share rides today because this mild-mannered seamstress refused to pay for segregation. . .<sup>84</sup>

Clark knew Parks from a Highlander workshop and was very familiar with the civil rights and anti-rape work Parks had done before her famous refusal to stand up. That Clark should reference in her own text the simplified, symbolic narrative of the event propagated by the male-dominated national movement appears to reflect the need to translate Highlander’s activities into the language of respectability to give them a more widely accepted meaning.

These examples demonstrate the complex interaction between Highlander and the politics of respectability and the way Clark transferred the negotiation of gender norms from the local to the public level. While her voice was restricted by the need to invoke the male-dominated civil rights movement her audience was likely to know and find appealing, she retained a certain amount of freedom to shape Highlander’s external image as she saw fit, through the lens of her

---

<sup>82</sup>Clark, “Champions of Democracy.”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

own perspective.<sup>85</sup> Travelling alone, speaking with supporters and writing pamphlets, Clark served not as a mere symbol of Highlander but as its ambassador. She did not have to completely hide her activism in order to represent the school positively. Her work in this context related to the functional needs of the school and required her to use gendered language, but her administrative role also allowed her to appropriate that language, expanding its implications to include the kind of work she did through Highlander.

#### ‘A Communist Outfit:’ The Cold War Context

The Cold War-infected discourse surrounding the civil rights movement threatened to disrupt this delicate maneuvering. It forced Highlander staff to defend their work to hostile audiences who viewed the school as subversive, particularly for its egalitarian principles. Legal action at the state level threatened to shut down Highlander, and Clark remembered that organizers trying to recruit students and teachers constantly struggled to overcome the fear of communism or accusations of being connected to it. After word got out of Myles Horton’s dramatic testimony at a 1954 investigative hearing chaired by anticommunist Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland, Horton asked Clark not to mention him in her recruiting because he thought his reputation might hamper their work.<sup>86</sup> Allegations of communism, however false, could destroy a person’s opportunity to work in certain places, especially when those accusations were of interracial sexual relations. When Clark and other staff members were arrested on Highlander grounds in 1959 on charges of illegal alcohol possession, they found out that the FBI had been spying on them, “peeping all around to see if black girls and white boys, and white girls and black boys were together.”<sup>87</sup> The charges against Highlander were later expanded to include integrated education in a private school and financial corruption, but the gendered racist ideology

<sup>85</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 265.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>87</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p. 9-10.

behind the accusations was clear, especially when one official referred to Highlander as an “interracial whorehouse” in the trials that eventually led to the school’s closing in 1961.<sup>88</sup> Clark worried that her damaged reputation would inhibit her work in black communities, especially with the upper-middle classes, who might judge her as low-class for her arrest and supposed alcohol possession. Clark, a teetotaler, had never approved of the small rotating beer fund that occasionally operated out of Highlander’s kitchen, but neither had she refused to work with people just because of their association with alcohol. Still, she understood well the judgmental mentality of many in both the black and white communities that had to be overcome in order to continue working. Clark knew that many white southerners with mindsets fueled by McCarthyism believed that if Highlander had whites and blacks living and working together, “they’re bound to have been communists.”<sup>89</sup> Clark’s friend, white civil rights activist Virginia Durr, suggested the tactics of propriety as a remedy, assuring Clark, “Of course your own fine character and your long life of integrity and purity and nobility is the finest answer to such low charges.”<sup>90</sup> Clark’s image of respectability and “purity” was one of her most powerful tools to surmount the impediment of communist accusations.

Unlike Rosa Parks, however, Clark could engage in face-to-face interactions with many of the people she needed to convince of her “integrity.” According to Clark, Highlander was “really a school for problems, but it was designated as a communist outfit, and so that gave us a good bit of trouble in the communities. And until we could go around and have some lectures and explain to the people what we were doing, we couldn’t get them at first.”<sup>91</sup> Image was one but not the only tool Clark could use to counteract accusations of subversive impropriety. She

---

<sup>88</sup> Multiple speakers, “The Highlander Story,” 1959, audiocassette UC515A/118, 29:00, Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>89</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p. 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 272.

<sup>91</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p. 3-4.

used her voice and her educational skills to maintain her capacity to organize, even if she could not stop the courts. Clark remembered of Highlander's run-in with the law that the FBI was "really disrupting the program at that time, but not for long because we went right back with our work."<sup>92</sup> While the somewhat disastrous result of the trials should certainly not be understated, Highlander was still able to build grassroots support for its programs through education. The school soon reopened in Knoxville under a new charter as the Highlander Research and Education Center and continued training activists alongside the SCLC.<sup>93</sup> Even so, despite Clark's light treatment of Highlander's closing above, the rocky transition of the citizenship education program to the SCLC tested the limits of Clark's relationship with the Highlander staff and at times threatened to push Clark into the background.

---

<sup>92</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p. 9-10.

<sup>93</sup> Horton, *The Highlander Folk School*, 253.

## Chapter 5: Staff Relations

### ‘She Never Hesitated to State Her Position:’ HFS Staff Interactions

Gender and sexism characterized staff interactions and power dynamics at both Highlander and the SCLC, although to varying degrees. Much of the time, especially during the earlier years of their collaboration, Clark felt that she was able to influence Myles Horton and the rest of the Highlander staff, ensuring that her ideas were incorporated into the school’s programs. Reflecting on her relationship with Horton, Clark remembered that she would argue with him about what she thought needed to be done and Horton would “go back home and think about what I said; then he would come back the next day and get things typed up the way I suggested.”<sup>94</sup> In early summer of 1955, Clark confronted Horton about the school’s failure to pay her as promised. While the two eventually worked out the issue, Horton later described Clark’s first year on staff as “a year of dialogue between us.”<sup>95</sup> Although she sometimes had to yell to make herself heard, that she had the opportunity to do so at all reveals how the schools inclusive functional structure allowed for channels through which women’s voices could be heard. Meanwhile, internal correspondence between Robinson and Horton reveals his appreciation for her work as well as an often supportive and sympathetic relationship. In one exchange, Bernice wrote Myles to remind him, “Though...you are *apparently* all alone, our thoughts and prayers are constantly with you and I am sure that God’s spirit surrounds you.”<sup>96</sup> Myles responded: ““I just want to tell you how much your March 1 letter meant to me. I will always treasure your

---

<sup>94</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 301.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>96</sup> Bernice Robinson to Myles Horton, 1 March 1959, box 24, folder 13, Administrative Correspondence, Robinson, Bernice (1959-65), Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

thoughtfulness in writing to me just when I needed to get such messages.”<sup>97</sup> A mutual understanding of the difficulties of the important work they were doing formed a bond between Clark, Robinson and Horton.

Clark also found that she was able to work with and influence local male leaders. Cooperating with Horton, Clark convinced Esau Jenkins that involving local people in planning and organizing was key to fostering leadership. In April 1955, Jenkins wrote to Horton, “My ideas of community leadership have changed in many ways...I found that giving others something to do and help making better citizens in a community is very important. My old way of doing things was slow.”<sup>98</sup> Although he was accustomed to conceptualizing leadership as male, Esau Jenkins also later affirmed to Myles Horton that, along with Bernice Robinson, he could certainly continue to work “under Mrs. Clark’s general direction.”<sup>99</sup> Clark was able to navigate the network of male leaders as well as assert her own leadership capabilities.

Still, Clark’s relationship with Myles Horton and the rest of the Highlander staff was not always smooth, as her struggle to assert herself in the planning process sometimes inflamed tensions between them. Her experience as a teacher and organizer and her background as a native Charlestonian and a black woman gave her an expertise that the staff did not always respect precisely because of her race and gender. These tensions came to a head during the transition of the citizenship schools to the SCLC where they were to be run by Andrew Young along with Septima Clark and Dorothy Cotton as the Citizenship Education Program in collaboration with the Highlander Research and Education Center, which would continue to help train teachers. As plans for this transfer proceeded in 1961, Myles formed the Citizenship

---

<sup>97</sup> Myles Horton to Bernice Robinson, 21 March 1959, box 24, folder 13, Administrative Correspondence, Robinson, Bernice (1959-65), Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>98</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 230.

<sup>99</sup> “Citizenship Program,” 1955, 1957, audiocassette UC515A/44.

School Program Committee to work out the details of the switch. While both Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson were technically part of this committee, they were rarely able to participate because they continued to administer the expansion of the program as well as cared for themselves, for both now suffered various health ailments brought on by overwork. In the women's absence, the committee decided that Clark would be put on staff at the SCLC, which would run the school program, while Robinson was to remain at HFS. Clark and Robinson informed Horton, "We have decided that we will work together while training, regardless of who pays who...we [refuse] to be swapped around like horses...We don't think anyone can plan *for* us, but *with* us." Both Clark and Robinson even went so far as to take the Peace Corps exam and considered leaving Highlander altogether.<sup>100</sup>

When an angered Clark reached out to another HFS staff member about the situation in June 1961, Myles responded, "I am sorry that you felt it necessary to take the planning out of my hands... despite the fact that I can understand why Negroes sometimes become impatient with those of us who are unable to move as fast as they think we should." He adopted an even more patronizing tone with Bernice Robinson: "As I think you know, we would like to build the non-SCLC part of the Citizenship Education Program around you, and arrange the finances so that the program can continue regardless of what might happen to Highlander this fall."<sup>101</sup> Horton failed to respond to the actual concerns the women expressed. Organizing veterans Clark and Robinson clearly understood the implications of Highlander's closing for the program and the necessity of the administrative transfer. They objected not to the speed of the transfer nor to the transfer itself, but to the undemocratic nature of the decision-making employed in the process, the staff's failure to account for the financial stability of Clark and Robinson, and the lack of

---

<sup>100</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 295.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-296.

consideration given to their ability to ensure that the program would continue to function effectively for both students and staffers.

A similar pattern emerged as the staff worked to gain the financial support of the Field Foundation for the continuation of the program, revealing the streak of racism Myles Horton possessed despite his strong belief in civil rights in equality.<sup>102</sup> Attempting to preempt the direct criticism he anticipated from Clark in order to protect the school's relationship to the Foundation, Horton explained to a Foundation staffer, "Septima sometimes assumes that she is a victim of white prejudice and chicanery, even though everything possible is being done by all of us."<sup>103</sup> This comment attempted to diminish the legitimacy of Clark's perspective by invoking her race and referencing stereotypes about nagging women. Other HFS staff members also criticized Clark for her perceived distrust in Horton during this difficult time. However, Clark and Robinson were not being unreasonable or overly needy; instead, the two women challenged Highlander to run by the principles of democratic organizing and respect for the knowledge of others on which the school was supposedly founded.

This neglect was particularly problematic, since the women's concerns about the transfer stemmed not only from worry about their personal situations but also from a desire to maintain the methodology and ideas that had made the citizenship program so successful in places like Johns Island. By the late 1950s, the program had grown significantly. This development was positive but created problems as well, especially as Highlander faced challenges to its very existence. The newer schools were based on the same basic model but were somewhat different in practice depending on the nature of various locations. Some of the newer locations were even

---

<sup>102</sup> In an earlier, unrelated incident, in what was meant to be a compliment, Bernice Robinson overheard Horton praise her articulate and educated speech, telling a colleague, "...if you put Bernice in a room and you've never met her and you listen to her talk, you wouldn't know what color she was." Robinson, interview by Thrasher and Wigginton.

<sup>103</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 297.

poorer and less economically secure than Johns Island. Clark worried that in expanding the program they were losing some of the techniques they had developed in the first pilot project. Emphasizing the necessity of choosing teachers carefully, she reiterated, “I was literally a Charlestonian...and knew the people on the islands and in the city...Therefore I could go to them with one potential leader and do a program.” Her personal proximity to the people she organized was crucial, otherwise people might “get the old feeling” that suspicious outsiders were coming in to make trouble. Organizing would then become much more difficult, as staff would have to build trust as well as their own knowledge of the area before being able to find and train a suitable community leader to run the program. Furthermore, Bernice and Septima worried about the trend they observed of men being chosen as the local program leaders for their ability to find a space to hold class and mobilize resources, even though the men were often not as attentive to the program as women were. Robinson and Clark wanted to continue overseeing the organization of the schools at the local level, as they knew from experience the importance to the program of community-based women’s leadership and involvement.<sup>104</sup>

Clark saw the attempt to standardize the program, putting herself and Robinson in a more administrative capacity, as consistent with Horton’s failure to understand the approach that she herself had developed, believed in strongly, and knew to be key to the success of the schools. In a memo the HFS staff prepared offering to help the U.S. Justice Department in its voter registration campaign, the staff highlighted the work of Myles Horton, portraying Clark only as “the precise instrument for carrying out the experiment.” Furthermore, the memo suggested that Clark was only able to run the program successfully with the guidance of Myles Horton because on her own she failed to “conceptualize a systematic methodology.”<sup>105</sup> Clark, meanwhile, had

---

<sup>104</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 284-285.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-286.

forty years of experience and a masters in education. She saw herself as one of the experimenters. While this memo should not be taken at face value as a summary of Horton's beliefs, the wording suggests that Horton did not fully understand how Clark's methods might be understood as an untraditional "systematic methodology." Clark suggested as much as she attempted to explain in the margins of the memo that the "procedures and techniques in each community were different. There was no general academic pattern. . . [the] pattern is the same and yet different."<sup>106</sup> Both Robinson and Clark had to make judgments about leadership and programming every time they encountered a new community, adjusting the program accordingly to meet the needs of different people. These judgments were exactly the "systematic methodology" of citizenship education Horton failed to describe in this memo. Horton's plan to have Clark and Robinson perform more general administrative work to facilitate the program's expansion distanced them from the sphere in which they could most powerfully influence the program's organizational philosophy.

The transition of the citizenship schools from Highlander to the SCLC put a considerable strain on the relationship between Horton and Clark. Still, they ultimately maintained a certain amount of respect for each other stemming from their shared project. In a somewhat telling tribute to Clark written in 1989 after her death in 1987, both lauding her actions and downplaying her voice, Myles Horton later wrote: "While she never hesitated to state her position, her advocacy was primarily by her actions and her relationship to the people she worked with."<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, the personnel changes Horton initiated put increased pressure on Bernice Robinson, who told Clark, "I cannot stand from 9 A.M. in the morning until 10 P.M. in

---

<sup>106</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 286-287.

<sup>107</sup> Myles Horton, "Septima Clark: Uncommon Witness," *Common Ground* 4, no. 1 (April 1989), box 10, folder 15, Myles Horton Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

the evening carrying on a workshop myself.”<sup>108</sup> She was expected to “keep the machinery rolling behind the scenes of the workshop and run the workshop too.”<sup>109</sup> While the program continued to run through the 1960s, Robinson resigned her post at Highlander in 1963 in frustration, although she continued to work with the program part-time as well as through the SCLC.<sup>110</sup> Still, while Robinson clashed with Horton over working conditions, she later expressed admiration for his skills as a community organizer: “I’d give anything to have the insight that Myles always seemed to have. He would always see twenty years down the road and know where you should be going. Where you should be heading in planning your strategy, your workshops.”<sup>111</sup> Her words reflect how the Highlander organizational platform Myles constructed provided a valuable context in which to develop the citizenship schools.

#### ‘He Couldn’t See It:’ Citizenship Education at the SCLC

While the relationship between Clark, Robinson and Horton was productive, if rocky, Clark found a different kind of resistance to her leadership within the ranks of the SCLC, where her job clashed with the typical image of women as devoted administrative workers. Ralph Abernathy constantly asked Dr. King why Clark was on the Executive Board of the SCLC, and while King would respond that she was the architect of the citizenship education program, Abernathy still

asked that many times. It was hard for him to see a woman on that executive body. . . I think that we live in a man-made world, and because of that, as a man, he didn’t feel as if a woman had really enough intelligence to do a thing like what I was doing. . . This is the way I interpreted it, because he kept asking the question.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 300-301.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Robinson, interview by Thrasher and Wigginton.

<sup>112</sup> Clark, interview by Walker, p. 11-12.

The executive board was the SCLC's center of ideological production, the body that dictated the actual work of the rest of the organization's staff. Ironically, in considering Clark's intelligence Abernathy also acknowledged that she would be playing a more influential role than he was used to seeing women fill. Clark was on the executive board not just as a testament to the work she had already done, but because her continued work was necessary to sustaining the program.

Although Abernathy did not explicitly say so, the SCLC's relationship with the politics of respectability might have been another reason he and other staff members harbored reservations towards Clark's leadership. Besides articulating the overarching tenets of the SCLC, the executive board members usually served as the public faces the organization displayed to the rest of the country. The members attempted to conform to the expectations of respectability of both the black and white middle classes. In structural terms, the SCLC dealt with the issue of public female leadership by having Clark technically work under the direction of the much younger and less experienced Andrew Young.

While Septima Clark understood the organization's mindset, she still found the SCLC's hierarchical leadership model frustrating and problematic. She looked for ways to circumvent these restrictions and translate the straightforward and vocal role she had played while on staff at Highlander to her new position. Clark firmly believed that people should become leaders in their own communities, where they were most familiar with both the problems and the people. While she had been able to implement this belief into the program through Highlander, the upper echelons of SCLC management were completely unreceptive to her ideas. She later remembered the reluctance of the organization's leadership to even consider a more inclusive approach that would have delegated responsibility to capable local organizers:

I sent him [Martin Luther King] two or three letters. . . about him going, being the head of everything. I just felt that he had disciples in Memphis and in some parts of Georgia,

Albany, and those people could go and lead a march. He didn't have to lead them all. And so he read the letter to the executive group, and there was a secretary sitting there, two other women, and I had spoken to them, too. But not a one of them said one word. And a young man who was in our office, but not a one of them supported me in that at all.<sup>113</sup>

Clark explained that even though she was technically on staff at the SCLC and attended staff meetings, she had to communicate with King by letter because, like other women, she had a hard time getting her concerns placed on the official meeting agenda and was often only given time to speak in staff meetings if there was extra time at the end.<sup>114</sup> Unlike in the collaborative process of Highlander, here her input was treated as an afterthought and her letter considered as a matter of procedure instead of for the value of its content.

While Clark was unable to influence the structure of the SCLC as a whole, she still managed to assert her organizing expertise on the ground, where she continued to organize and train people according to her own leadership philosophy. She was adamant that the movement's organizers should facilitate personal empowerment rather than lead followers. When SNCC volunteers got involved in the voter registration project as well, she would instruct them to accompany a woman to cash a check at the A & P but not cash it themselves, for example, so that people could learn from movement organizers without being dependent on them. Although this example might seem insignificant, Clark's instructions treated interacting with local power structures as a piece of claiming citizenship. Analyzing her work with the citizenship program in the 1960s, she reflected:

I don't think that in a community I need to go down to the city hall and talk; I think I train the people in that community to do their own talking. This is what I would do. But he [King] couldn't see it. I would not have ever been able to work in Mississippi and Alabama and all those places if I had done all the talking.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup>Clark, interview by Hall, p. 84.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Clark, interview by Hall, p. 84-85.

Training people to go talk to city hall officials was not simply a photo opportunity for leaders. It put citizens into contact with the government bodies that made decisions about their lives, an integral step in the process of turning people into voters and active citizens.

Clark's tenure at the SCLC represented one more negotiation of a gendered system. She and her cousin were no strangers to the difficulties racism and sexism imposed on them as they worked to assert their expertise over the program they themselves had formed. Over and over again, they emphasized the importance of all the values Clark tried with little success to communicate to King. While the nature of the program did inevitably change as the SCLC expanded it and incorporated it into its massive voter registration project, it did not entirely lose its original character. Barred because of her gender from fully participating in the organization's designated space of theoretical development, the board meeting, Clark instead used her administrative responsibilities as a means of implementing the strategy of sensitivity and empowerment she and Robinson developed at Highlander and whose value she knew to be at the core of true citizenship education.

## Conclusion

As the civil rights movement wound down, Highlander eventually shifted its focus to issues of environmental justice. It held workshops and supported local people-turned-activists, many of whom were housewives with little formal education and scarce resources, in their efforts to resist the environmental degradation of their land and water supply by fossil fuel corporations.<sup>116</sup> Today, the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee serves as center for researchers and holds activist training workshops.

Highlander's origins in the labor movement provided an important framework in which to create the citizenship schools, as its practice of basing its programs on the needs of its students and of using education as a tool to effect social change made it the perfect starting point for the project. Furthermore, the school's organizational philosophy meant that the staff was willing to give women like Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson the space, flexibility and personal influence to form the program according to their own expertise, experimenting and expanding the classes taking into account the differences between communities and students.

Native Charlestonians Clark and Robinson brought invaluable experience to the Highlander team. Clark had been a schoolteacher in different parts of South Carolina including Johns Island until the school board fired her and many others for their NAACP membership. She had also worked on advocacy projects through women's clubs. Robinson, meanwhile, had lived and worked in New York City for a period before returning to Charleston, where she ran NAACP meetings out of her beauty shop. Both Clark and Robinson possessed a deep understanding of the effects of race and class in the Charleston area. In order to connect those effects with larger political themes like voting, the two women utilized skills they had developed

---

<sup>116</sup> *You Got to Move*, directed by Phenix and Selver.

situated within society in the stereotypically female roles of teacher and beautician. More specifically, the ability to stimulate dialogue and listen carefully helped Clark and Robinson formulate a program whose structure and content respected the background of its students.

In the course of this process, the two women were forced to confront the masculine understandings of leadership prevalent in many communities. Clark and Robinson engaged in a subtle negotiation of gender norms, often invoking ideas of male religious leadership to facilitate recruitment for Highlander programs. Such language also proved useful to Highlander's publicity efforts as a way to put the citizenship education project into a well-known and accepted context. At the same time, strategically employing gendered frameworks did not preclude these women from injecting their own voices and stories into the dialogue on civil rights at Highlander.

In other civil rights organizations as well as in the realm of national politics, gendered notions of leadership placed a much greater restriction on women's organizing. Internal sexism meant that male leaders excluded women from most high-level roles within the organizations, while the need to project the respectability of the movement often forced women to serve as symbols of feminine propriety, regulating their bodies and silencing their voices. These politics of respectability came into play with particular significance as the Cold War intensified. Highlander's attackers accused its members of communism, impropriety and interracial sex. The staff had to counter this misinformation in their workshops in order to keep organizing with any success.

While Highlander's philosophy and organizing style did make the school more open to women's vocal activism, both Clark and Robinson experienced resistance to their leadership from the rest of the Highlander staff, especially Myles Horton. The structural sexism of the

SCLC, however, was far more frustrating for Clark and Robinson, who felt that their exclusion from many decision making processes risked causing fundamental alterations to the structure of project they had put so much work and knowledge into creating. Overall, though, while Clark and Robinson often fought to assert themselves as leaders and experts in multiple different contexts, the powerful program they ultimately created was a direct product of the women's backgrounds, their encounter with Highlander, and the organizational and educational philosophies this intersection produced. These activists forged their own style of women's leadership through which they helped people claim their rights as American citizens.

## Bibliography

### Primary

#### *Audio Files*

- Clark, Septima. "Citizens Workshop." UC515A/58, 27:25, undated. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Clark, Septima. "Highlander Report." UC807A/12, 42:15, 1959. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Clark, Septima. "Recording of music and a historical presentation." UC807A/4, 4:35, 1954 or 1955. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Multiple speakers. "Broadcast material on the Highlander Story." UC515A/120, 29:00, 1960. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Multiple speakers. "Citizenship Program." UC515A/44, 28:45, 1955, 1957. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Multiple speakers. "The Highlander Story." UC515A/118, 29:00, 1959. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.
- Multiple speakers. "The Highlander Story." UC515A/119, 9:35, 1959. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. Audiocassette.

#### *Autobiographies*

- Clark, Septima Poinsette with Blythe, LeGette. *Echo in My Soul*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962.
- Clark, Septima Poinsette, and Cynthia Stokes Brown. *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*. Navarro, Calif.: Wild Trees Press, 1986.

#### *Film*

- You Got to Move*. DVD. Directed by Lucy Massie Phenix and Veronica Selver. Harrington Park, NJ: Millenium Zero, 2011.

*Manuscript Collections: Miscellaneous Correspondence, Clippings and Promotional Materials*  
Administrative Correspondence: Clark, Septima (1954-66). Highlander Research and Education Center. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Administrative Correspondence: Robinson, Bernice (1959-65). Highlander Research and Education Center. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Highlander Research and Education Center. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Myles Horton Collection. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

*Transcribed Oral Histories*

Clark, Septima P. Interview by Peter H. Wood, 3 February 1981. Box 1, folder 30. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Clark, Septima Poinsette. Interview by Eugene Walker, 30 July 1976. Transcript by Jean Houston, Southern Oral History Project. Box 1, folder 29. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Clark, Septima Poinsette. Interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 25 July 1976. Transcript. Southern Oral History Project and Documenting the American South Project. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1976. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0016/menu.html>.

Robinson, Bernice. Interview by Sue Thrasher and Eliot Wigginton, 9 November 1980. Transcript. Box 2, folders 34-35. Highlander Research and Education Center, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

**Secondary**

Charron, Katherine Mellen. *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Ford, Tanisha C. "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress." *The Journal of Southern History* 79 (2013): 625-658.

Glen, John M. *Highlander: No Ordinary School*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996.

Gore, Dayo F. *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Griggs Flemming, Cynthia. "'More than a Lady': Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Black Women's Leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee" in Ruiz, Vicki L. with Du Bois, Ellen Carol eds. *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women's History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Horton, Aimee Isgrig. *The Highlander Folk School : a History of Its Major Programs, 1932-1961*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

Houck, Davis W. and Dixon, David E., eds. *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

- McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.
- Payne, Charles M. *I've Got the Light of Freedom : the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Robnett, Belinda. *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Rouse, Jacqueline A. “‘We Seek to Know...in Order to Speak the Truth:’ Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent—Septima Clark and Participatory Leadership” in Collier-Thomas, Bettye and Franklin, V.P., eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.