

**Guns and Agape:
Audley Moore, Diane Nash and the Tradition of Black Female Leadership**

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To all outward appearances the lives of Diane Nash and Audley Moore could not have been more different. Born in two different centuries and separated by a thousand miles and the Mason Dixon line, one believed that armed revolution was a viable path to Black freedom, while the other believed that violence demeaned those inflicting it more than those absorbing it. By all rights it would seem that these women should have taken roads as removed from one another as two sets of railroad tracks, running parallel to one another in some sense, but never to meet. Yet in a broader historical perspective, their lives resemble something closer to tributaries flowing into the same river.

Born in the nadir of African American history, Audley Moore was an uneducated, orphan teenager raising two younger sisters when she decided she deserved a better lot than the one rural Louisiana provided her. Three decades later Diane Nash grew up in middle-class Chicago, a former beauty queen, and a stellar student at two of the county's most prestigious historically Black universities, when she sought out James Lawson and his non-violent workshops. Both women had experiences that drove them to activism despite all the risks that accompanied such a choice.

Yet neither became the sort of activist most histories have written about – either the “great man” or the countless scores of women who worked behind the scenes organizing, making flyers, giving activists food to eat and places to stay. Nash was the spokesperson for the Nashville movement and publicly challenged the city's mayor to declare whether he thought it was right to judge someone based on the color of their skin. She stood in a Mississippi courtroom, pregnant with her first child and declared that

she'd rather go to jail than participate in an unjust system. Moore stood on ladders in Harlem organizing Black workers and running political campaigns. Her determination to "de-negroize" Black Americans inspired thousands of young Black activists to take pride in their heritage and appearance. Neither Moore or Nash were confined to a behind-the-scenes role.

In the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement, Black women were invisible. In the later literature Black women came to activism through their church or friends and were relegated to jobs considered in all sectors of society to be "women's work." Neither Nash nor Moore however, fit this profile. Some historians have begun exploring the history of Black female activism in the mid-twentieth century, trying to place both their activism and their political life in a larger context. However, few have explored the ties that bind the work of the activists of the 1960s to the generation which came before. One historian who has written about this link, Lynne Olson, notes, "In order to adequately recount the story of the women of the 1950s and 1960s, I realized I would also have to write about their forebears and the remarkable legacy of activism, courage and rebellion that these early pioneers handed down."¹ Without women like Audley Moore, Ella Baker and Septima Clark there could not have been Diane Nash, Angela Davis and Ida Mae Holland. The younger generation depended on the groundwork laid by their elders.

Nash and Moore probably never met personally, but Nash and her peers felt the influence of the older generation in myriad ways. Nash fell under the direct tutelage of Ella Baker in SNCC, but even the young Black women not fortunate enough to have this

¹ Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 16.

connection became activists. Many were members of sororities with an activist tradition at historically Black colleges, or their mothers and grandmothers were members of organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women. Working class women did not have these opportunities, but they passed to their daughters the activist traditions they developed at work or in churches.

The lives of Diane Nash and Audley Moore provide an opportunity to explore this intergenerational link as well as examine the false divide of “violence” versus “non-violence.” History has often painted a portrait of the civil rights movement as though it came down to a simple bifurcation in which activists fell into one camp or the other. This tidy story has been complicated by books like Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* and Clayborn Carson’s *In Struggle*, which both shed light on the complex and painful debates that raged within the movement over which tactics would be the most effective. Nash and Moore’s lives provide proof that Black women were at the forefront of this debate from the very beginning of the movement, struggling both with one another and their own consciences over the question of armed self-defense and non-violent resistance.

Nash’s commitment to the principles of agapic love and nonviolent resistance ran as deeply as her willingness to sacrifice everything to the movement. While history has painted nonviolent resisters as passive, it is obvious that Nash’s beliefs are anything but passive. Instead she, like Gandhi and King before her, worked at her beliefs, developing a philosophy that viewed nonviolence as a force or energy.² She refused to cooperate with a system that did not recognize her right to full citizenship, even if it meant she

² Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, 202-222.

would probably have to give birth to her first child in prison. Nonviolence was never a tactic for the weak of heart and Nash proved over and over again how tough and resilient she was through her dedication to the struggle. Indeed, it was never a never merely a tactic for Nash, but a philosophy.

No one would have ever questioned Queen Mother Audley Moore's commitment to the struggle for freedom either. Moore, however, chose a different path of activism. Nonviolent resistance was not the natural state of affairs for Blacks in the South. Moore grew up in a culture that taught African Americans to protect themselves with whatever means necessary, including the guns most homes contained.³ Moore aligned herself with organizations that advocated armed resistance for African Americans, such as the United Negro Improvement Association and the Revolutionary Action Movement. And when the occasion called for it, she carried a gun to protect herself in a country that refused to do it for her.

While the experiences and philosophies of Audley Moore and Diane Nash were very different, they shared a commitment to the freedom struggle for African Americans that ran deeper than any other force in their lives. Neither was willing to reject allies whose philosophies differed from their own. Their stories are full of complexity and show that people rarely fall neatly into one category or another. It is far more frequent that people's lives and opinions are filled with shades of gray rather than black or white, and are the more interesting for it.

³ For more on the tradition of armed self-defense, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

FREEDOM TALK

Audley Moore carried two guns with her on the night she went to Longshoremen Hall in New Orleans to hear UNIA founder Marcus Garvey speak, a small revolver in her purse and a pearl-handled pistol in her dress. Recalling the event years later, Moore couldn't remember whether it was 1921 or 1922, but she remembered the guns. Prevented by police from speaking the night before, Garvey and his followers were determined to make sure that this event would not be stopped. "So we all had guns, everybody had guns and a suitcase of ammunition," she recalled. "I'll never forget. So we were determined, so you see we were not cowarded down, down there...How dare they stop him from speaking to us! This was the thing, the audacity."⁴ Garvey denounced the mayor as "a stooge of the chief of police." At that, one of the many policeman who filled the aisles, jumped onto the platform and told Garvey that he was going to "run [him] in." Garvey's audience would have none of it. "At that point," Moore remembered, "everybody stood on the benches, every gun came out. Every gun said 'Speak, Garvey, speak.'" The police suddenly decided that Garvey's words fell under the First Amendment freedom of speech protection and quietly filed out of the hall. "They knew they would have been slaughtered in that hall that night. Because nobody was afraid to die. You've got to be prepared to lose your life in order to gain your life."⁵

Audley Moore spent nearly 100 years trying to gain her life and the millions of lives she would never meet. Although she maintained the same fearless spirit she showed

⁴ Audley (Queen Mother) Moore interview with Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. Black Women's Oral History Project, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University [Here after referred to as Gilkes interview] P. 125.

⁵ Interview in *Black Scholar*, 53

at Longshoremen Hall throughout her life, Moore's philosophy of activism underwent several radical changes. Motivated by the injustices she saw all around her, particularly during World War I, Moore became a Garveyite in the early 1920s. This led to a dramatic expansion of her world-view. She educated herself in the history of colonialism in Africa and the economic pillaging of Africa's natural resources. It may have been "race first," as Garvey said, but economic exploitation underlay everything. As the Garvey movement declined she found a new political home within the Communist Party, where she spent a decade and a half sharpening her organizing skills. Despite her deep involvement in the CP, she watched its commitment to Black freedom fall by the wayside. She eventually came to believe that the Party suffered from the same racism as the rest of society. After her resignation from the CP, she went on to become one of the leading voices for the Pan-Africanist movement and the fight for reparations. While she often worked outside the mainstream freedom movement, Moore sometimes worked closely with many of the more conservative Black leaders.

Audley Moore's life and work falls far afield of the traditional narrative of Black women in the civil rights movement, which frequently confines women to the supporting cast. The limits of this narrow focus are compounded by the emphasis on the protests of the 1950s and 1960s which often ignores the activist tradition out of which this later movement grew. Historians such as Deborah Gray White have discussed the "clubwomen" such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell, whose generation preceded that of Moore, but there is a large gap in the historiography between these women and the women of SNCC and the SCLC.

While there are a few women who have garnered scholarly attention, Moore's activism stands apart in significant ways. Amy Jacques Garvey is noted for her outspoken views, but she was able to use the considerable political apparatus which her husband constructed to voice her opinions (even when they stood in marked contrast to those of her husband). Little is known of Moore's husband and her activism preceded her marriage by many years. The club women took an extremely different approach to the proper role of female activism than did Audley Moore. She was a Garveyite, a Communist and a Pan Africanist, willing to go to jail, while the clubwomen took a far more conservative approach to social change. The clubwomen, by and large, believed in racial uplift, captured in their motto, "lifting as we climb." Their work centered on demonstrating that Black women's morality and domestic skills made them worthy of respect and citizenship.⁶ Ella Baker, active in Harlem at the same time as Moore, initially had the backing of the NAACP. While Baker became the guiding spirit of SNCC, Moore became that of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). The activism of both women was part of a historical legacy stretching back to that of slave women and abolitionists who fought for recognition of Black women as humans and she helped lay the groundwork for the generation of activists who followed.

The daughter of a deputy sheriff in New Iberia, Louisiana, Audley Moore was born in 1898.⁷ Orphaned and left to care for herself and two younger sisters by the time she was in the fourth grade, she left school and became a hairdresser to support the

⁶ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

⁷ There may have been something within the community of New Iberia that bred an independent spirit. After moving to New York, Moore became involved in the Apostolic Church, one of the most popular and successful churches in Harlem. The denomination was founded by another native of New Iberia, Reverend Mr. R. C. Lawson. For more on this see Robert C. Twombly, *Blacks in White America*, 193-195

family. Moore and her sisters were politically motivated by the injustice of Jim Crow from a very young age. Perhaps their father's position of authority within the community had instilled a strong sense of pride and independence in the girls. Or perhaps this came from the stories the girls had been told of their maternal grandmother, Nora Henry. Born into slavery, Nora was the daughter of an African woman raped by her white slave master. As a young woman, Nora watched as her husband was lynched, leaving her with five children to raise alone.⁸ One of Audley Moore's first memories was of a lynching in New Iberia. Peeking out of the shutters, Moore watched as a wagon drove down the dirt road dragging a black man behind it. The vision of the man's head "bumping up and down on the clay, the hard, crusty road" while the white men who followed behind "hollered like wolves" haunted Moore for the rest of her life.⁹

Whatever the reasons for their activism, during World War I Audley and her sisters followed a group of soldiers to Anniston, Alabama where they were dismayed at the inequitable treatment given to the Black soldiers. Seeing that the Black soldiers had no place to relax like the whites did, 14 year-old Eloise Moore, Audley's younger sister, established what Audley later called "the first U.S.O." In an abandoned church, Eloise set up a place where Black soldiers could come for coffee, doughnuts and cards. She

⁸ Deloise Naewoaagn Blakely, *Queen Mother Audley E. Moore: In Honor of a Warrior Woman* <http://hierographics.org/mohtermoorebio.htm> It should be noted that sources disagree about the relationship between Audley and Nora. She is listed as grandmother or great-grandmother and one source claims that it was Nora who was raped by a white man. Although impossible to know for sure, given the timeline it seems likely that Nora was her grandmother, and it is unclear as to whether she too was raped by a white man as this was all too common an experience for Black women at the time. There is no way to know exactly why Moore grew into a determined activist at such an early age. Unfortunately, the main sources of information about Moore's life are the oral interviews she gave late in life, which suffer from the usual problems of memory and clarity that accompany such sources.

⁹ Gilkes interview, 123.

became so involved in their welfare that she went to their commanding officer when one Black soldier reportedly was unjustly accused of a crime by a white officer.¹⁰

The Moore sisters, like thousands of other Black Americans, were appalled by ironies of the war. Fighting for democracy abroad, many believed, would bring them closer to democracy at home. In 1918, W.E.B. Du Bois urged support of the war effort in the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*. "We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome," he wrote. "Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy."¹¹ Membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) exploded and the Wilson administration, in need of all the support it could garner for the war, began to give grudging acknowledgment to Black demands. Historian Judith Stein notes, "Popular demands summarily rejected in prewar years became negotiable."¹²

This may be an overly optimistic assessment of the political climate however. While the Great Migration brought thousands of Black workers (and voters) to the North, there was no significant change in the social or economic position of the vast majority of Blacks. Race riots in St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919, which left scores of Blacks dead and injured in both cities, show that the fight for equality was making little demonstrable advancement. Even the United States Army maintained its Jim Crow rules, largely in deference to Southern fears that Black soldiers would return from a Europe free of Jim Crow laws with a disagreeable interest in issues such as equality and freedom.

¹⁰ Gilkes interview, 118.

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks" *The Crisis*, July 1918.

¹² Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 91.

One South Carolina congressman noted, apparently without irony, "If you put a boy from Mississippi in a Negro regiment from Massachusetts you won't have to go to Germany to have war. You will have it right here."¹³

In some ways this turned out to be a prophetic statement. Black soldiers *were* imbued with a new sense of self and an increased militancy. Black men who fought on the fields of France in the uniform of the U.S. Army were unwilling to return to a brutal racial caste system. W.E.B. Du Bois, taking a different tone at the end of the war than he did at the beginning, wrote, "Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land."¹⁴

Indeed many Blacks did not even leave American soil before they took drastic measures against racial discrimination and injustice. In Houston in 1917 one hundred Black soldiers enraged over the beating of one of their own by white policemen and treatment in the Jim Crow army in general, marched through the streets killing five policemen and twelve other whites. The trials and executions that followed further outraged Black America as many of the defendants were given no opportunity to appeal. The army's own investigation into the incident concluded that the violence stemmed from Black soldiers' desire to "assert what they believe to be their rights as American citizens and United States soldiers."¹⁵ This incident was a harbinger of what was to come and the

¹³ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 92.

¹⁴ Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *The Crisis*, May 1919.

¹⁵ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 94-95.

atmosphere was ripe for someone like Marcus Garvey to seize the imagination of Black activists throughout the country.

The Jamaican born Garvey was the founder of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an organization whose mission was to bring education, economic independence and racial pride to Black people throughout the world. An outspoken and fiery leader, Garvey stood apart from most of his contemporaries when he argued that the goals of the Black freedom struggle should not be integration within a racist society, but economic and social independence apart from white society. The UNIA was enormously popular with Black people hungry for reinforcement of their worth as human beings throughout the world, and Louisiana, where Audley Moore and her sisters lived, had the largest concentration of UNIA chapters of any state or country in the world.¹⁶

Given their actions, one would think that the Moore sisters were already politically conscious, but Audley Moore credits Marcus Garvey as the one “who brought [me] the consciousness.”¹⁷ Like so many other Black Americans, Audley and her sisters felt transformed by Garvey’s passionate speeches. Although already fighting the injustice of the South’s rigid racial caste system, the Moore family was a product of this hierarchy, inculcated in the ways in which they were “inferior” to white people since the day they were born.

Rooted in the systematic effort to politically and economically disenfranchise African Americans, white supremacy extended into almost every aspect of Black life. The rules that governed the lives of Southern Blacks in the 1920s were terrible, arbitrary and inviolable, but they hadn’t always existed. The success of the Fusion and Populist

¹⁶ Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 365-366.

¹⁷ Gilkes interview, 123.

movements of the late 19th century, which brought together poor Black and white farmers based on their shared political and economic goals, posed a serious threat to the wealthy white planter class of the South. They responded with a campaign of terror and violence throughout the South, literally overthrowing the state government in North Carolina in 1898 and seizing control of ballot boxes by killing state officials in Alabama.¹⁸ This was not enough to guarantee lasting success, however. Wealthy whites had to ensure that this sort of interracial cooperation, however limited and tentative, would never again come to pass. "The only formula powerful enough to accomplish that," Historian C. Vann Woodward writes, "was the magical formula of white supremacy, applied without stint and without any of the old conservative reservations of paternalism, without deference to any lingering resistance of Northern liberalism, or any fear of further check from a defunct Southern Populism."¹⁹

The main ingredients in this formula were race and sex. The protection of white womanhood from the imagined rapacious nature of Black men became the rallying cry to which poor white men responded. Myths about the highly sexualized nature of Black men were revived, and paranoia about "social equality," or miscegenation, fueled white hysteria. The mere accusation of Black on white rape was more than enough proof needed for a lynch mob, and the definition of rape itself expanded to include things like speaking to a white woman in an unseemly fashion or looking just a bit too long. One

¹⁸ For more on the political overthrow of North Carolina's government in 1898 see David Cecelski and Timothy Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed*. Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 36-37.

¹⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 84-85.

young man running to catch a train brushed up against a white woman; a mob hanged him for "attempted rape."²⁰

These murders often happened in full daylight with the cooperation of the local authorities. Indeed they were public spectacles. These horrific events were thought to be suitable entertainment for the whole family complete with postcard photographs of the event or body parts taken as souvenirs.²¹ The violence of these mobs began to assume a sort of terrible logic in and of itself. The more lynchings there were, the more necessary they appeared, making it seem all the more important to maintain a strict racial hierarchy to protect white women. White manhood became inextricably linked to one's willingness to protect white womanhood by any and all means necessary. In the process, white men "racialized the definition of manhood and substituted race for class."²²

While it would seem logical for people to come together under the common banner of class concerns, white supremacy made that exceedingly difficult. The threat of social equality dangled in front of anyone who called for any political or economic advancement for Blacks. Newspapers and politician stirred this hysterical cauldron at every opportunity. "Political equality being thus preached to the negro in the ring papers and on the stump, what wonder that he makes no distinction between political and social equality?" an Atlanta paper thundered in 1906. "He grows more bumptious on the street, more impudent in his dealings with white men, and then, when he cannot achieve social equality as he wishes, with the instinct of the barbarian to destroy what he cannot attain

²⁰ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 307.

²¹ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 283-294.

²² Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 83.

to, he lies in wait, as that dastardly brute did yesterday near this city, and assaults the fair young girlhood of the South."²³

The accusation of rape was the most powerful weapon white supremacy carried, but it wasn't the only one. Indeed, Gunner Myrdal notes that out of the thousands of recorded lynchings in the South only a small percentage were actually accused of rape or attempted rape.²⁴ Most of these accusations were lies told to justify horrific violence and the real reasons for the brutality were economic gains on the part of Blacks, or behavior that was seen as too "uppity." The offenses that justified lynchings ranged from refusing to show the proper deference to whites to refusing to give up one's farm. The practice known as "whitecapping" in some parts of the South, was an organized effort on the part of local whites to force Blacks to give up their land. Black land-ownership was not only a threat to economic domination by whites, but also represented Black freedom from white economic control.²⁵

Audley Moore's grandfather was lynched for "standing up to some white people" who wanted his land. "This was all it amounted to, because after he was lynched they ran my grandmother off the land, and she had to take her five little children and flee for her life with the things they had on their back, nothing else."²⁶

Although slavery had been abolished, most Black men and women lived a life of indentured servitude as sharecroppers or tenant farmers that kept them tethered to the land. Unlike Moore's grandfather, most Black people rarely owned their own land in the

²³ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 221.

²⁴ Gunner Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 561.

²⁵ See William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902-1906," *The Journal of Southern History*, 165-185.

²⁶ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 154.

late 19th and early 20th century South. Instead they worked the land for a white landowner who sold them seeds and tools as well as providing housing. The white landowners also controlled the process that sold the cotton crops and tallied the profits against the sharecropper's debts at the end of the year. Black farmers could count themselves lucky if they ended the year with the news that they had "broken even." More often than not, the landowner came to them with the bad news that the farmer was in the red and would therefore spend the following year paying off his debt. In this way, most Black Americans were kept tethered to their land, economically repressed and unable to control any aspect of their futures.

Lynchings were the most brutal demonstration of white power, indeed they served as a warning to other Blacks as they were punishment to one. "Even if they never were the targets of lynching," Lynn Olson writes, "even if they never saw one themselves, young blacks grew up in a climate of unremitting fear and terror, knowing full well that they once again were under the white man's heel."²⁷ However, white power went far beyond this most extreme example and permeated almost every aspect of Black life. Jim Crow laws segregated Black people from white on street cars, in neighborhoods, in hospitals and stores in order to further push them down. The work of white supremacy required constant attention. Whites could allow no cracks in the dam that might give Black people the opportunity to rebel. In reality, of course, resistance to the system by Blacks was ever present and the rules needed constant re-enforcement. Yet, by bombarding Black people with repeated reminders of their precarious and second-class

²⁷ Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 39.

position in society, whites succeeded in making Black people internalize a belief in their own inferiority.

“[Y]ou grow up that way,” Audley Moore lamented. “You can experience things without being conscious of yourself, too, you know. And I find that that is true with our people, they see the brutality of the police all against us, and they see the fact that jobs are denied our people, housing is denied us, and so on, and yet a certain consciousness is not aroused.”²⁸ Later she came to believe that this sort of debasement was a deliberate attempt on the part of whites to “Negroize” Black people. “How they [white oppressors] made a Negro? This was a technique,” she explained. “It requires a lot of study. They were working on it all the time. They had to get us into a position where we would drive ourselves to them, debase ourselves, so that it would no longer be necessary for him to stand over us, to get us to bend in his direction. Where we would hate ourselves, hate each other, and love him.”²⁹

Moore’s exposure to Marcus Garvey marked the beginning of a new consciousness for her. The ways in which this society worked were not lost on Moore. She was deeply aware of the affect this system had on her and those around her. As a child she watched as her mother was forced out of the pew which bore her name, paid for by her donations, to the back of the church to pray under the sign that read “For Colored Only.” “I saw my mother cry. I saw my mother, who had taught me never to show your feeling, I saw the tears roll down my mother’s cheek.”³⁰ Her experiences within the Garvey movement expanded her sense of self and her understanding of the history of

²⁸ Gilkes interview, 123.

²⁹ Interview in *The Black Scholar*, 53.

³⁰ Gilkes interview, 122.

Black people throughout the world. Defying the police at Longshoreman's Hall was an exhilarating experience for Moore. "From then on, oh, I was a staunch Garveyite, you see." Garvey's belief that Black people should stop holding themselves up to white standards of beauty instilled in Moore a new sense of racial pride. "I remember telling everybody how proud we should be of our woolly hair and Garvey had taught us all that." This new sense of self, however, extended far beyond physical appearance. Despite her limited education, she became an avid reader of African history and she and her husband bought stock in Garvey's Black Star Shipping Line. They sold the grocery store they owned and decided to move to Africa.³¹

Ironically, it was myths about the "dark continent" that kept Moore and her husband in the United States. Talked out of their planned journey by an aunt concerned that the couple would be eaten by cannibals, they instead moved to California. By 1922 the couple had little tolerance for the sort of racism they encountered in the West. They packed up once again when a white clerk told them that a five-cent bottle of soda would cost Audley five dollars. After less than a month in California the couple moved to Chicago where they found the living conditions for Black people even more appalling than those they had left behind in Jim Crow New Orleans. Finally the couple arrived in Harlem, the epicenter of Black culture and society.

Harlem, in the first decades of the 20th century, experienced a population explosion. From 1920 to 1930 the Black population of New York City grew 115 percent, from 150,000 in 1920 to 327,000 in 1930.³² The boll weevil, coupled with droughts and floods, forced thousands of Black Southerners to head north in search of work. By 1910

³¹ Gilkes interview, 125-126.

³² Anthony J. Cooper, ed., *The Black Experience 1865-1978*, 201.

less than 25 percent of Manhattan's Black population had been born in New York.³³ Historian Nathan Irvin Huggins writes, "It was just that sense of possibility and power that persuaded many black men and women to come to Harlem in the years around the Great War. Blacks who wanted to be where they could reach the widest audience – to organize and inspire blacks throughout the world, to cajole whites to reform."³⁴ Poets, artists, scholars and activists as well as those in search of a better life than the one available in the South or the Caribbean, all flocked to Harlem. Indeed, almost a quarter of Black Harlem was from the Caribbean, where activism and resistance took more militant forms.³⁵ The result blended the best African American writers and artists on the same blocks with Black domestics and factory workers. The words of Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston, and the activism of Arturo Schomburg found their rhythms in the same streets where poor women waited to be hired for day work.

Audley Moore was appalled by what she saw as a modern day slave market. As these women were picked over by their potential employers, Moore could not help but think of the auction block. Wealthy whites would inspect their knees for the tell-tale scabs of a good floor scrubber and check the muscles in their arms to make sure they were strong enough to flip mattresses. "She who is fortunate (?) enough," wrote Ella Baker and Marvel Cook, "to please Mrs. Simon Legree's scrutinizing eye is led away to perform hours of multifarious household drudgeries." Those lucky enough to be hired often made as little as fifteen cents an hour, if they could collect their wages at all.

³³ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 27.

³⁴ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 15.

³⁵ James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 12.

Moore, impatient for action, helped form the Harriet Tubman Association, which organized Black domestics.³⁶

Poor Black women had few options, North or South, for employment. Historian Darlene Clark Hine notes that 80 percent of Black women in Chicago during this time were personal servants or domestics and it seems likely that the same would true in New York.³⁷ Most worked as domestics in white homes where they cooked, cleaned and cared for the children. Often they were married with children of their own, but returned late or sometimes not at all during the week if they were lucky enough to have a permanent position. A Black woman in 1912 wrote: "For more than thirty years – or since I was ten years old – I have been a servant...in white families...More than two-thirds of the negroes of the town where I live are menial servants of one kind or another...I frequently work from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. I am compelled...to sleep in the house. I am allowed to go home to my children, the oldest of whom is a girl of 18 years, only once in two weeks, every other Sunday afternoon – even then I am not permitted to stay all night."³⁸

Black domestics, particularly those compelled to live-in, were also vulnerable to sexual assault by their white male employers. The "fair young girlhood" for which segregationists expressed such concern did not extend to Black women. Since the days of slavery, Black women had fought the stereotypes which caricatured them as steamy Jezebels or Black Mammies. While neither role afforded them the luxury of protection

³⁶ Ella Baker and Marvel Cook, "The Bronx Slave Market" *The Crisis* November 1935; Raymond R. Sommerville, "Queen Mother Audley Moore" 764-767.

³⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 381.

³⁸ Anonymous, "I Live a Treadmill Life" In *Black Women in White America A Documentary History*, 227.

under the law, the Jezebel was particularly damning as it placed them in direct contrast to the “prevailing vision of the True Woman, who was chaste, pure, and white... This construct of the licentious [Black] temptress served to justify white men’s sexual abuse of Black women.”³⁹

Much to their dismay, the Moores found that these stereotypes and Jim Crow segregation were alive and well north of the Mason Dixon line. In Harlem they were once again outraged by the living conditions for Black people. “I was never so disappointed in my life as I was when I came to New York. No Black men was driving the buses, the streetcars, no Black men on the subways, no Black people working in their own neighborhood in Harlem.”⁴⁰ But, the Moores were grateful for Harlem’s Black community, which was a hotbed of political activism. Casting about for solutions, Audley decided that the only answer was the political process. “Well, I don’t know nothing about politics now,” she said, “so...I called my people together, I remember calling my people together. I didn’t have a program, I just knew we ought to be united and what did I say? For us to say yes at once or no together. Either we all say yes, or we all say no.”⁴¹

Moore helped to form a tenants union and organized what she called the first Black rent strikes in New York.⁴² Rents in Harlem were often double or triple those of

³⁹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 11.

⁴⁰ Gilkes interview, 127.

⁴¹ Gilkes interview, 127.

⁴² *The Black Scholar* interview, 53. Moore may have been unaware of the full history of rent strikes in New York City. While these strikes *may* have been the first centered around Black issues in Harlem, rent strikes had been an on going tactic in New York since 1904, and often included areas which had Black populations, such as Harlem in 1919. See Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*.

the rest of the city, but because of a segregated housing market, Black people had few options.⁴³ “We were engaging in a struggle,” Moore exalted, “We broke the backs of the landlords on Sugar Hill.” Despite Moore’s bravado, the Harlem Tenants League found limited success trying to organize strikes and the Communist Party, one of the major backers of rent strikes throughout the city, was not very powerful in Harlem during these years. Because Harlem tenants were subjected to higher rents and limited options elsewhere, rent striking entailed a risk that many were unwilling to take. Working in concert with political leaders, however, Moore found that sporadic strikes proved effective, as did legislation expanding tenant bargaining power that passed the state assembly.

According to historian Mark Naison, “The Tenants League agitation represented an important step in implanting a culture of collective protest among Harlem tenants.”⁴⁴ The effort also exposed Audley Moore to the political system and further experience organizing. “During that time I went to jail three times,” she claimed. Never one to miss an opportunity, Moore used her time in jail to lecture the other inmates on the foolishness of committing petty crimes when there was a much larger war for freedom to win.⁴⁵ This was an extraordinarily brave move at a time when many of the leading Black advocates argued for a politics of respectability. This political ideology dictated that Black people, particularly women, were constant representatives of the race, and through respectable behavior could improve the lot of all Blacks.

⁴³ Lawson and Naison, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, 97.

⁴⁴ Mark Naison, “From Resistance to Rent Control: Tenant Activism in the Great Depression,” in Lawson and Naison, 98.

⁴⁵ *The Black Scholar* interview 53.

Well before the days when civil rights activists wore their trips to jail as badges of courage, most Blacks in the 1930s considered jail, particularly for women, a disgrace.

Jail was a dangerous place for Black people in general as the laws that protected Americans from abuse or brutality by police did not extend to them. But even beyond the issue of safety, middle class Blacks viewed jail as a peril and a humiliation suitable only to the lower classes. This was especially true for women at a time when social strictures on female behavior were extremely confining. Black women were also restricted by the ideology of respectability, which was so pervasive among female activists.

Much of early 20th century Black female activism was centered around the idea that a race can rise no higher than its women; this ideology of respectability was a direct challenge to the Jezebel stereotype. "The criterion for Negro civilization is the intelligence, purity and high motives of its women," a Black doctor from Texas, Monroe Majors, wrote in 1893. "The highest mark of our prosperity, and the strongest proofs of Negro capacity to master the sciences and fine arts, are evinced by the advance positions to which Negro women have attained."⁴⁶ The female activists who carried these attitudes into the 20th century worked, not only for Black freedoms, but to embody the values of "respectability." The ideology of female uplift resulted in an embrace of bourgeois life and a definite class-consciousness. People who subscribed to this rhetoric measured Black women by the yardsticks of chastity, cleanliness and dignity and placed them in opposition to the Black migrant women who had recently moved North.⁴⁷ Audley Moore's willingness to go to jail stood in marked contrast to this ideology.

⁴⁶ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 43.

⁴⁷ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 5-15.

This radicalism may have resulted from her adherence to Garveyism and her work within the UNIA. Nor was she alone as a Black nationalist pressing women's issues to the forefront. Garvey's second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, was most definitely not a subscriber to her husband's belief that Black women should be placed on a pedestal. Marcus Garvey wrote that Black people should "go back to the days of true manhood when women truly revered us...let us again place our women upon the pedestal from whence they have been forced into the vortex of the seething world of business."⁴⁸ After her husband was convicted and jailed, Jacques Garvey took over operation of the UNIA and its ideology began to shift toward placing women firmly in the political world. Eschewing concern for male pride, Jacques Garvey wrote, "We serve notice on our men that Negro women will demand equal opportunity to fill any position in the [UNIA] or anywhere else without discrimination because of sex...We are very sorry if it hurts your old-fashioned tyrannical feelings."⁴⁹

Perhaps for women like Jacques Garvey and Moore, their gender sometimes worked to their advantage. At a time when people were killed for being an outspoken African American, it is possible that being a woman softened the delivery of radical ideology. There were certainly Black women lynched for their views, but the overwhelming majority of those killed were men. In the early twentieth century, ideas about gender were so fixed around notions of women as nurturing caregivers that it may have been possible for some Black women to act as ideological firebrands without being seen as an immediate threat. While Garvey was targeted by the federal government for his views, his wife was not. Throughout her life, Moore had male friends such as Robert

⁴⁸ As quoted by White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 121.

⁴⁹ As quoted by White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 138.

F. Williams, Malcolm X and W.E.B Du Bois who experienced harassment by the government and threats from the opposition, but she escaped relatively unscathed. Perhaps in her gender, Moore had a freedom with which she could develop her political philosophy more fully than if she were a man.

As the UNIA began to fall apart after Marcus Garvey's deportation in 1927, Moore looked for other political outlets. Because the Democratic Party was the party of Southern segregation, she became a Republican. After she discovered that the party of Lincoln was hardly a bastion of liberal racial attitudes, she left that, too. Finally in 1930 the International Labor Defense (ILD) organized a parade through Harlem in support of the Scottsboro boys. The case in which nine young men were falsely accused of raping two white women and sentenced to death had gained international attention, due in large part to the work of the ILD.

On March 25, 1931, the Scottsboro boys, the oldest of whom was twenty at the time of their arrest, had scuffled with some white men on a train. As revenge for being bested by the Black boys, the whites went to the authorities, and with the cooperation of two young white women, accused the Blacks of rape. Within weeks the boys were on death row, awaiting what seemed certain execution. The ILD, however, caught wind of the story and for reasons both altruistic and calculated, took over their defense and made the story international news for years to come.⁵⁰

The CP recognized the potential the Scottsboro case offered for organizing within the Black community. "Party leaders," historian Dan Carter writes, "easily convinced themselves that the Negro, as the most disadvantaged and impoverished group in the

⁵⁰ The last "Scottsboro boy" was released in June, 1950.

country (and with the least stake in the capitalist system), should flock to the red banner.”⁵¹ It had been difficult to organize poor Black farmers, however, and the CP saw the Scottsboro case as a “chance to educate, add to its ranks, and encourage the mass protest necessary not only to free the boys but also to bring about revolution.”⁵² The ILD organized a defense for the boys and attracted publicity both to the injustice of the case and to the Party. According to historian Mark Naison, “[t]he campaign to free the Scottsboro boys, more than any single event, marked the Communist Party’s emergence as a force in Harlem’s life.”⁵³

Moore had naturally heard of the case, but had never seen a demonstration of such magnitude. Impressed by the way the Black communists linked the African American freedom struggle to imperialism in Africa, and the Party’s stand on anti-lynching laws and civil and voter’s rights bills, Moore was convinced to join. “Well now, I thought this was a wonderful vehicle...All of that was good for me, you know, and I learned a lot, and I participated, I joined in with both feet, I struggled, every day, every day, every day.”⁵⁴ She immediately joined the International Defense League, believing it was the Communist Party (CP) and joined the official Party three years later.

Garveyites and Communists battled for influence in the streets of Harlem. The move from Garveyism to Communism was a common one among Black activists. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes, “Those who entered radical circles toting the baggage of cultural nationalism found support in Communist theory. Ironically, Stalin’s mechanical definition of a nation, which embraced a ‘community of culture’ as a central concept,

⁵¹ Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, 65-66.

⁵² James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*, 27.

⁵³ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 57.

⁵⁴ Gilkes interview, 132.

simply reinforced the modern nationalist idea that the basis of nationhood was a single, identifiable culture.” And thus communism and Black nationalism, while generally seen as oppositional, were not always in tension. Kelley goes on to point out that Black activists, particularly the Garveyites, were already laying the groundwork for what would become Pan-Africanism.⁵⁵

During her time in the CP, Moore gained a greater understanding of political and economic systems. “I joined the Communist Party and it gave me an in-depth understanding of capitalism, which I had not known that I was under...It taught me the science of society, an analysis of the imperialism and of socialism, and for that I’m grateful.”⁵⁶ She continued to organize working-class people and she ran for New York State Assembly as the Communist Party candidate in 1938 and for alderman of the 19th Assembly District in 1940. Moore worked as the campaign manager for Black C.P. member, Benjamin E. Davis, Jr. who served on the New York City Council in the 1940s. She protested the Italo-Ethiopian war and the depiction of Blacks in films. Moore also led the fight to end the gerrymandered districts and create a congressional seat for Harlem. Along with her friend, Harlem resident Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who was elected to congress in 1945, she was an outspoken advocate for desegregating both professional baseball and the Coast Guard.⁵⁷

Despite all Moore believed she gained from both the Communist Party and the UNIA, she still thought of herself as still having a “Negro” mentality. She later regarded her decision to fight for an integrated baseball league as evidence of her misguided goals.

⁵⁵ Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 114-115.

⁵⁶ Gilkes interview, 124.

⁵⁷ Barbara Bair, “Audley Moore” 363; Blakely.

“[H]ad I not been a Negro, I would [not] have fought to get our teams in the big leagues,” she told an interviewer. “But what I did was kill the [Negro league] teams. We had teams...When our teams played in the communities throughout the country, our communities was ablaze with activity...our youngsters [had] something to aspire to.” After Jim Crow was abolished in baseball, whites continued to profit off of the work of Blacks, there were no Black club owners or managers or stadium owners. The business of baseball was still segregated, just in a more subtle and systemic way.⁵⁸

One of the things that had attracted her to the Communist Party in the first place was its professed commitment to the ideals of Black self-determination, even if that meant the formation of an independent Black nation within the continental U.S. By the late 1940s, however, the Party had begun to back away from self-determination in the “Black belt” and Moore became increasingly aware of what she called “rampant racism” within the organization.⁵⁹ Although the CP was a genuine advocate of civil rights for African Americans, internally the organization was plagued by many of the same racial tensions it sought to eliminate.⁶⁰ After World War II many Black Communists believed “the party had used Negroes for its own ends,” encouraging Blacks to support the war once the Soviet Union was also fighting Germany.⁶¹ In addition, the CP could never fully reconcile itself with the Black nationalists within its ranks and Moore’s desire to “de-negroize” African Americans coupled with her ever-growing belief that integration was at best a misdirected goal, forced her to resign from the Communist Party in 1950.⁶²

⁵⁸ Gilkes interview, 134-135.

⁵⁹ Gilkes interview, 134.

⁶⁰ Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 50.

⁶¹ Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds*, 68.

⁶² Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues*, 119.

Although she believed that the Party had taught her “the difference between a quantitative change and a qualitative change,” she no longer had faith in its commitment to the goals she held most dear.⁶³

While some might characterize this as evidence of Moore’s increasingly radical view of the political process, it should be noted that she continued to work closely with people steeped in a more conservative approach to civil rights. While she was in the CP she joined the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), a relatively conservative club organized in 1896 and led by women like Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper.⁶⁴ This group was one of the leading proponents of the ideology of female uplift. In this context, Moore supported campaigns for the inclusion of blacks in all New Deal welfare and jobs programs and equal access for Black women in the WACS and WAVES.⁶⁵ Moore and Terrell also worked closely in the National Campaign to Free the Ingram Family. Georgia sharecropper, Rosa Lee Ingram, was on death row after killing her landlord in self-defense. As the New York City head of the “Save Mrs. Ingram Committee,” Moore petitioned the president and attorney general to save the mother of twelve. Mrs. Ingram was spared the death penalty, but spent years in prison.⁶⁶

Moore also had strong ties to educators Mary McLeod Bethune and Dr. Lawrence Reddick. Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), of which Moore was a lifetime member, was a special advisor on minority affairs to President

⁶³ Gilkes interview, 135.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that what can be counted as conservative in civil rights is relative. Ida B. Wells certainly wasn’t considered conservative by anyone’s measurement, but the NACW was conservative in comparison to the UNIA or C.P.

⁶⁵ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 150.

⁶⁶ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 198.

Franklin Roosevelt and a close friend of the First Lady.⁶⁷ Bethune later became the vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which Moore, echoing Garvey and others, called “the National Association for the Advancement of *Certain* People.” Reddick, a history professor and head of the library at Alabama State, traveled extensively with Martin Luther King in the 1950s and 1960s, becoming his King’s first biographer in 1959. Both Bethune and Reddick encouraged Moore’s outspoken activism and helped her hone her public speaking style. Moore said that Bethune once told her: “If I had ten women like you, I wouldn’t go through no back doors no more.”⁶⁸ This is a surprising statement from a woman who spent her life working within a political movement that, according to some, deepened the class divide between middle-class and working-class Black women.

Perhaps this relationship can be better understood within the complicated context of Black female activism. As noted before, the ideology of female uplift limited the number of acceptable roles for Black women. Women had to dress and act a certain way to gain credibility within the community. Not only that, but bourgeois Black women often tried to make a clear distinction between themselves and their working-class counterparts as evidence of how far they themselves had come. Black Southerners like Moore who had moved North were cast by these racial uplifters as ignorant and unclean. As historian Victoria Wolcott points out, “This reveals a central paradox in the logic of uplift ideology: on the one hand, African American elites were attempting to help the poor and working classes achieve middle-class standards of respectability; on the other

⁶⁷ One source states that she was a *founding* member of the organization, but Moore herself makes no such claim in any interviews I read.

⁶⁸ Gilkes interview, 139.

hand, doing so would weaken the unique positions of leadership these men and women held." Wolcott goes on to note that the only way to resolve this conflict was to embrace the class system as proof of African American social evolution.⁶⁹

Although Audley Moore did not subscribe to this notion of racial progress, she may have provided a foil for the clubwomen of the early twentieth century. In much the same way that the threat of violence was used as a tool to make nonviolence more palatable in the 1960s, Bethune may have recognized that Moore's strident voice allowed her (Bethune) to seem far less radical than her detractors claimed. When people like Moore called for reparations, Bethune must have found it easier to raise money for Black colleges. The relationship, however, was a two way street. While she often disagreed with the NCNW agenda, Moore certainly gained credibility within certain circles through her relationship with prominent figures like Bethune.⁷⁰

Moore herself was certainly aware of the contradictions within the Black community. She pointed out that, despite the reputation they later received, Black churches were not often at the forefront of the freedom fight. "I'd been speaking on the street ladders because none of the churches would let us in with our kind of talk. They didn't want to hear no freedom talk," she said. "Now this wasn't nationalist talk, mind you, this was all that integration talk that the Communists were doing long before any Martin Luther King."⁷¹ In addition, Moore's own complicated relationship to the politics of manhood was probably quite close in keeping with the clubwomen's philosophy of gender hierarchy.

⁶⁹ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 15-16.

⁷⁰ Paula Giddings, *Where and When I Enter*, 223-225.

⁷¹ Gilkes interview, 139

Moore believed that it was the duty of Black women to fight not only for their own rights, but for those of Black men. "First of all," she said, "I agree that black women have before them the problem of total liberation. Liberation for their people. Liberation for their children. And liberation for their men...Also, the black woman has the responsibility to establish values."⁷² She, like the clubwomen, believed that Black men had few chances in a society structured specifically to marginalize and oppress them and, therefore, a Black woman's duty was to, in her words, "support her man."⁷³ According to the FBI, she also proposed that Black men take more than one partner and Black women have as many babies as possible.⁷⁴

While there can be little doubt that Moore firmly believed in the ideas she advocated, it seems likely that she also recognized the political implications of her ideological positions. Moore's outspoken nationalism put her in a position of influence with many of the most powerful men of her day, and certainly many would have appreciated a woman who believed it was the responsibility of women to bolster masculinity. For example, she claims that she and her sister were the ones to teach Malcolm X about Africa.⁷⁵ One wonders, given the realities of her own life, how much of her rhetoric about the place of women was a result of the positive reinforcement she may have received.

Ironically, most sources offer little information about the relationship between Moore and her husband, Frank Warner. She makes little mention of him in the few

⁷² *The Black Scholar* interview 47.

⁷³ *The Black Scholar* interview 48.

⁷⁴ Memo, October 9, 1967, Audley Moore file, Federal Bureau of Investigation (hereafter cited as AM/FBI).

⁷⁵ Gilkes interview, 151.

interviews she gave, and gives no details about the nature of their relationship including when they met or married. Her FBI file notes that she claimed to be separated from, and “just friends” with Mr. Warner in 1953, but that the couple did have an adopted son. Moore herself discusses her son and his family at great length, noting that she took two of her grandchildren on a trip to Africa, but never mentions her husband.⁷⁶ Moore’s high level of commitment to her causes could not have been easy on her personal life and perhaps her reluctance to discuss her marriage stemmed from a desire to keep her personal and public lives as separate as possible.

Interestingly, Moore’s contemporary, Ella Baker, also resisted revealing information about her marriage or private life to other activists. In some ways, this reflects the secrecy which historian Darlene Clark Hine argues Black women used to protect themselves. “Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations,” Hine writes, “black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.”⁷⁷ While Hine points to the ways in which domestic workers were vulnerable to sexual assault, one can see how female political activists were also leaving themselves exposed to personal attack. It is possible that these two women were trying to protect their loved ones from attack by their enemies. It also seems likely that both Moore and Baker were trying to resist whatever assumptions were made about women based on their marital status. Baker’s biographer, Barbara Ransby, posits that Baker may have been “resisting the ways in which public female figures were

⁷⁶ Memo, February 17, 1955, AM/FBI.

⁷⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” 382.

so often defined in conjunction with male partners and in terms of their sexual identities.”⁷⁸

Whatever her personal situation, the activism in Moore’s life clearly took center stage and did not end when she resigned from the CP in 1950. In the years that followed she became an advocate for prisoner’s rights and lobbied to bring attention to cases of interracial rape of Black girls living in institutions. Both causes were spurred by the outrage she felt after seeing the situations firsthand, and demonstrate her willingness to let her agenda be set by the most pressing needs of the Black community. In this way, Moore’s activism mirrors that of Ella Baker, whose motto, “strong people don’t need strong leaders,” became the guiding principle of SNCC. Like Baker, Moore seems to have been driven by a desire to give people the tools with which they could improve their own lives. Her campaign for reparations is reflective of this.

In 1962, Moore discovered a passage in a Methodist encyclopedia which she claimed stated that “a captive people have one hundred years to state their judicial claims against their captors or international law will consider you satisfied with your condition.”⁷⁹ While it is unclear how this religious text would have helped her wage a political fight, Moore was inspired to organize for reparations. The pressure was on, however, as the one hundred years mark was quickly approaching. Traveling across the country, scraping together money for gas and surviving an attack by the Klan that left bullet holes in her car, Moore helped form the National Emancipation Proclamation Centennial Observance Committee, which later became the Reparations Committee.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 255-256.

⁷⁹ Gilkes interview, 155.

⁸⁰ *The Black Scholar* interview 51; Memo, July 27, 1962, AM/FBI.

The committee met to discuss the demands they would make to the U.S. government and Moore stressed the importance of allowing Black people to decide collectively what should be done with reparations money. “[W]e decided that we’re a nation and that we are entitled to reparations, and that we had no intention of having reparations given to no little clique, no little group, and do what they want with it. That it belonged to our people, and that it had to be in sufficient amount that it would benefit the fourth generation...The unborn, the unborn, that’s our concept of what reparations should mean to us.”⁸¹

Moore was interested in creating an economic infrastructure within the Black community. In a philosophy that can be traced to her days as a Garveyite, she envisioned Black run steel mills in an autonomous Southern state.⁸² Moore wanted to avoid another poverty program that might, in Robin Kelley’s words, give “the government and a handful of black elites control over our destiny” which would cause further psychological damage to African Americans.⁸³ Moore was interested in creating a system where Black people were self-sufficient. While she and Baker were both interested in empowering Blacks at all levels of society, Moore seems to have believed that this could only be accomplished by creating a system completely separated from whites. As part of this effort she was at the forefront of several organizations whose aims included bringing self-determination to African Americans.

⁸¹ Gilkes interview, 162; Moore told Gilkes that she and a delegation did go to the White House in the hopes of presenting their demands to President Kennedy, but got no closer to him than his secretary’s secretary.

⁸² Gilkes interview 162.

⁸³ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 119-120.

One such group was the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women (UAEW). As its founder and president, Moore was instrumental in writing a leaflet entitled "Draft Resolution for the Establishment of An Independent Black Republic." The UAEW laid out its case for self-determination. Pointing to the abuses suffered by African Americans at the hands of the Federal government, the leaflet claimed that the U.S. was unfit to rule a people who aspired to be free. The group demanded that the states of Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, Maryland, North and South Carolina, and Virginia should form the basis for a new Black Republic. Taking its cue from the Declaration of Independence, Moore's UAEW began with a preamble:

"We, the Black people of these sovereign states of North America, having petitioned for redress in the most humble terms against oppression to the various authorities, only to be answered with repeated injuries, now realize that the solution to our problem can only be solved through self-determination, without which there will be no justice and righteousness, to provide for the common good and welfare of our people and our posterity.

"Therefore we ordain and present this Declaration for our Independence, to put an end to the colonial system of tyranny over us that has prevailed consistently during the period of our captivity until this present day.⁸⁴

The idea of an autonomous state in North America for Blacks was not new. Indeed the promise of self-determination lured Moore to the C.P. It is also one of the reasons the founders of both the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Republic of New Africa (RNA) chose Moore as one of their guiding influences.

RAM was a short-lived, but influential underground organization formed in the early 1960s and based on a combination of Maoist and Black Nationalist ideologies.

RAM believed that the goals for Black liberation in the U.S. could not be removed from

⁸⁴ Memo, July 2, 1962 AM/FBI.

the larger goal of freedom from capitalist tyranny for the “Bandung,” or non-white, world and that an armed revolution was necessary to achieve their goals. Heavily influenced by the writings of exiled activist Robert F. Williams, RAM developed a plan for a guerilla war as well as the new society that would emerge in the aftermath. Freedom schools, rifle clubs and farmer cooperatives were just a few of plans the organizations had for an autonomous Black state.⁸⁵

Similarly, the Republic of New Africa, established in 1968, had elaborate future plans for an autonomous state for African Americans. Reasoning that the South had been developed on the backs of exploited Black laborers, leaders of the RNA, who called themselves a government-in-exile, delivered to the State Department their demands that Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina and Louisiana be liberated and that the U.S. government provide \$400 billion in start-up money for the cooperative economy the RNA was planning. Like RAM, the RNA formulated a strategy of warfare should the U.S. government turn them down. No one could accuse of Moore of thinking small when she said, “We felt that it would take at least ten years, [of] agitation, preparation, organization.”⁸⁶

Both of these organizations connected their struggle for freedom to the struggle against colonialism around the world, but particularly in Africa. The RNA based its economic plan on that of “Ujamaa, the Tanzanian model of cooperative economics and community self-sufficiency.”⁸⁷ RAM called for a “re-Africanization” of African Americans, by which they meant “a rejection of Western materialism in favor of an

⁸⁵ Memo, October 9, 1967 AM/FBI; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 81.

⁸⁶ William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 145-147; Gilkes interview 163.

⁸⁷ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 145.

essential African communalism, humanism, and spiritualism that, many insisted, was intrinsic to traditional African society.”⁸⁸ This edenic view of pre-colonial Africa led some devotees away from seeing Africa in all its complexity. Historian Wilson Moses writes that this sort of “Afrotopian” ideology often creates a utopian vision of Africa, but one that ignores the diversity of the continent.⁸⁹ Moore herself was caught in this irony when she professed her deep admiration for the murderous dictator Idi Amin.⁹⁰ It was, however, in keeping with her Garveyite roots that the organizations she associated herself with looked to Africa as a place from which to draw pride and inspiration.

Throughout her life Moore was so consistently at the forefront of the most radical aspects of the Black freedom struggle that even her detractors labeled her “the prototype” activist.⁹¹ Even the FBI acknowledged Moore’s crucial status as a bridge figure, noting in a memo that Moore represented the “relationship of [current] racial groups with those of the past.”⁹² Examination of her life would be important to anyone interested in the more radical aspects of the movement, but it is equally important to fully grasp the activities of the generation of female activists who followed. She defied many of the gender stereotypes of her day, while reinforcing others and offers us a rare glimpse into the life of a woman whose work doesn’t fit into any of the categories on which historians rely. Moore did not come to her activism through any of the usual institutions for women such as church, family, school or work.⁹³ Nor did she ever accept the “traditional” roles

⁸⁸ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 88.

⁸⁹ Wilson Moses, *Afrotopia*, 19.

⁹⁰ Gilkes interview, 166-167.

⁹¹ Memo, December 4, 1968 AM/FBI.

⁹² Memo, October 9, 1967 AM/FBI.

⁹³ The fact that Moore’s father was a sheriff in Reconstruction Louisiana leads one to conclude that there *must* have been a tradition of activism and self-determination in the

for women within the movement – that of behind-the-scenes organizer or secretary. To the younger generation of Black female activists who followed her, Moore would have offered an example of leadership that showed women they could chart their own destinies and not simply follow a prescribed path.

Moore family. However, while Moore reminisces about her family, she doesn't mention instances where she saw her parents directly challenge the status quo.

Applied Religion

In 1962 Diane Nash Bevel received two letters. The first was from a Harvard University graduate student who wanted to interview Nash and her husband Rev. James Bevel for his doctoral thesis about the direct action protest movement that was going on at Harvard.¹ The second was from Robert (Bobby) Talhect, who described for Nash a protest in Jackson, Mississippi. Talhect was picked up by NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers and taken to the Jackson post office where he picketed until he was arrested. He asked Nash, "What do you think about this? Was this test successful or not? What do you think my next step should be?"² In the early days of her activism Nash had suffered almost debilitating fear. But within a few years she had become a potent political force that stood firm in the face of judges, mayors and even the president of the United States. Less than three years after the sit-in movement had transformed the South, Diane Nash had transformed herself from a quiet college student to an iron willed, nonviolent activist and movement intellectual whose reputation preceded her. Scholars and activists alike sought her opinions.

Diane Nash did not set out to become a leader in the civil rights movement. There was little in her childhood to suggest that she would become a person known as a "dangerous subversive" by Tennessee authorities.³ Instead, she had plans of becoming a

¹ James H. Laue to Diane Nash, March 18, 1962, box 2, folder 3, Amzie Moore Papers, SHSW.

² Robert Talhect to Diane Nash, June 19, 1962, box 2, folder 3, Amzie Moore Papers, SHSW.

³ Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, p. 35.

nun.⁴ Eventually, Nash, like many of her peers, felt compelled to put her life at risk to change a system she viewed as immoral. Within a few months of involvement in the freedom movement, Nash established herself as a key leader and public spokesperson for the Nashville movement, a group which Taylor Branch called “the shock troops of the sit-ins and the earliest legends within SNCC.”⁵ Within a year, she was leading a workshop for other students entitled, “Jail Versus Bail: an analysis of the philosophical and economic ramifications of this issue.”⁶

Though civil rights organizations and the news media rarely acknowledged women as leaders, local movements looked to selected women for guidance and direction. These “bridge leaders,” as Belinda Robnett calls them, were the connection between the movement and the community. These women usually had strong community ties through either church or volunteer work and were active in many areas.⁷ Robnett claims that these women occupied these positions not because of a lack of leadership experience, but because of “a social construct of exclusion.” Men were more likely to have access to traditional forms of leadership through institutions like the church, whereas women lacked these opportunities. Because of this, women occupied what Robnett calls the movement’s “free spaces.” They used their community ties to develop one-on-one connections, and developed a nonhierarchical approach to leadership.⁸ The work these women did was of vital importance, but is frequently overlooked in the canon

⁴ Timothy B. Wheeler, “An Activist’s Lesson in Courage; Civil Rights Pioneer Tells Students of Power of Nonviolence” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 29, 1998.

⁵ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, p. 54.

⁶ Agenda from SNCC conference: “Nonviolence and the Achievement of Desegregation” Oct. 14-16, 1960, box 62, folder 2, Braden Papers, SHSW.

⁷ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, p. 19-21.

⁸ See Belinda Robnett, “Women in SNCC.”

of civil rights history, where emphasis has been placed on the accomplishments of the few at the expense of the many thousands of nameless activists. "The result," sociologist Charles Payne argues, "is a history more theatrical than instructive."⁹

Diane Nash seems to occupy a unique position in civil rights history. She was a community leader with a nonhierarchical approach to organization who often felt left out by a boy's club mentality within the movement; yet she also was a recognized leader in both function and title. Nash had little patience for institutionalized forms of leadership, as evidenced by her frustration with people like Martin Luther King, Jr. She firmly believed in the power of grassroots organizing and direct action protest. Repeatedly the men in the movement recognized her gift for leadership. She was a public voice for the movement as well as a behind-the-scenes organizer.

Born in Chicago to a middle class family, Diane Nash experienced personal, stinging racism, but not institutionalized segregation. As a child, Nash attended a parochial school for Blacks and Indians where one of the nuns told her, "You *know* that we love God in our order, because we deal with the least of God's people." When she was fifteen Nash called a charm school to find out about admission. Told by the man in charge that she was, "just the kind of young woman we're interested in," Nash gave her address, which was in the historically Black part of town. Suddenly the man's attitude changed, "My dear, are you by any chance colored? Well, dear we don't have a facility for colored students."

Nash's family life reinforced the idea that whites were inherently superior. Her maternal grandmother, Carrie Bolton, had grown up as a domestic worker for a family of

⁹ Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 418.

whites in Memphis, and she viewed the disparity between the cultured, quiet and refined behavior of the white family and the boisterous behavior of the Black servants as a reinforcement of the stereotypes about Blacks. "If there was a philosophy to her home," Nash said later, "it was that white people had better things because they worked harder and were better people." At the same time, Bolton was devoted to Nash and was a constant source of praise and love for the child. She instilled in Nash a deep-seated belief that she was worthy of love and respect and that she should never let anyone mistreat her.¹⁰

Nash transferred to Fisk University in Nashville from Howard in the fall of 1959 with little thought about the consequences of moving to a Southern city. Although her stepfather had been a waiter on the railroads and told stories about segregation in the South, Nash failed to recognize what this move would mean in her own life.¹¹ In Nashville, however, she soon encountered overt discrimination, which left her feeling humiliated and outraged. She later attributed her politicization to the Tennessee State Fair where she felt humiliated by segregated bathroom signs designating "White" and "Colored." "I resented it deeply," she later noted.¹² She also discovered that, although the stores were happy to take her money, she and her friends were not welcome in the lunchrooms.¹³ Before moving South she had understood her stepfather's stories on an "intellectual" level; after realizing how her own life would be affected, she "understood it emotionally as well." Like most college students, Nash was "growing and expanding," but found the rigid societal rules "stifling." She began looking for ways to channel her

¹⁰ David Halberstam, *The Children*, 146-148.

¹¹ Fred Powledge, *Free at Last*, 207.

¹² Wheeler, *op. cit.*

¹³ Halberstam, *The Children*, 5.

anger and sought others as outraged as she was, but met with little success among her peers. "I got so many 'no' answers, and the attitude of the students I talked to on campus was so resigned – that that's the way it has been and is going to be. I really had started coming to the conclusion that they were apathetic."¹⁴

Fortunately, Nash discovered James Lawson's non-violence workshops. Lawson, a student at Vanderbilt's Divinity School and southern secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), was running workshops in non-violent civil disobedience for Black students. Lawson was a conscientious objector and was jailed for draft evasion during the Korean War. He also spent three years in India and traveled extensively throughout Africa studying the tenants of non-violence. His young students must have been impressed by Lawson's worldliness and perhaps were more willing to follow the lead of a man who had lived up to his own principles.¹⁵

Lawson moved to Nashville not only to attend Vanderbilt, but with the express purpose of fostering a civil rights movement there. He believed that a movement in Nashville was possible because it boasted a young, relatively moderate mayor, Ben West, and it was an upper South city in Tennessee which did not have expressly segregationist laws, merely customs, a small, but important distinction. It was also a college town and had an arm of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference) already established. When he arrived, Lawson began looking for

¹⁴ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 208.

¹⁵ David Sumner, "The Publisher and the Preacher" 35.

a way to translate what he taught in workshops into constructive action. It was the women of his group who provided him with an opening.¹⁶

Women in Lawson's workshops told him about the inconvenience and humiliation they experienced shopping downtown. Merchants and customers alike frequently insulted them as they shopped, which was degrading, but more importantly there was no place the women could stop to rest. Sometimes women with large families would shop for several hours without a place to sit and refresh themselves. This was particularly hard for mothers with small children in tow. They were even denied the pleasure of giving their children a cup of ice cream as a treat. When they brought this to the attention of Lawson and the rest of the workshop participants, the group decided that integrating downtown would be their first goal.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that it was a problem that disproportionately affected women, as they pointed out to Lawson. Women spent more time downtown as the primary shoppers of the family, while Black men's jobs were usually elsewhere in the city.¹⁸ "Their witness really changed my whole view of racism and segregation again as they described in specific terms the burden of just simply trying to do an ordinary chore: shopping," Lawson explained.¹⁹ The disproportionate participation by women in the civil rights movement undoubtedly had many subtle influences on the direction of the movement, but this is an example where the women's input had an immediate and direct

¹⁶ Sumner, 38; Interview with James Lawson on the PBS website in conjunction with the documentary, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*.

¹⁷ PBS interview.

¹⁸ PBS interview.

¹⁹ Richard Deats, "Fighting Prejudice Through Creative Nonviolence: An Interview with James Lawson"

impact. Because of, women's "overparticipation"²⁰ in the movement, the Nashville women were able to make an issue that affected them the focal point of the entire group. However, it took the leadership of a man, Lawson, to make this happen.

The first lesson James Lawson instilled in his students was the power of righteousness. He told them, "Your idea is not small and because your idea is not small your numbers will not be either."²¹ This lesson was probably necessary, in part, to ensure that the participants kept coming back. For a small, somewhat rag-tag group of mostly young people like the ones Lawson had attracted, the fear of what lay in store must have been intense. They talked about other groups that had resisted oppression such as the Resistance in Europe during World War II and Gandhi in India.²² Nash felt inadequate to the historical moment. "I remember realizing that with what we were doing, trying to abolish segregation," Nash later observed, "we were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, businessmen, and I remember thinking, 'I'm only 22 years old. What do I know? What am I doing?'"²³

The second lesson was in the practical aspects of non-violence. Lawson wanted to dispel what he felt were the misconceptions of non-violence. He felt that attackers were made angrier by the sight of protesters in the fetal position; the students should always try to maintain eye contact with their attackers. The workshops used role-playing to teach participants how to protect themselves and others from serious injury. The rules were strict, designed to protect both the students and the integrity of their cause. Instruction rules included: "Don't strike back or curse if abused. Don't laugh out. Show

²⁰ Charles Payne, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* 1.

²¹ Halberstam, *The Children*, 61.

²² Powledge, *Free at Last*, 205.

²³ Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 131.

yourself friendly and courteous at all times. Sit straight and always face the counter. Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King."²⁴ Nash was skeptical at first: "I kind of reserved judgment. I remember thinking, after attending several workshops, that this stuff is never going to work. But it was the only game in town, and so I said, 'Well, I'll go with it because my choice is either to do nothing about segregation or to work with them.'"²⁵

Despite her initial doubts, Nash's status within the group rose quickly among her fellow participants, who began to look to her as a leader. Some have attributed this in part to Nash's beauty and poise. Her Northern, big city upbringing must have made her seem very sophisticated to the other students, many of whom were from rural backgrounds. And she *was* beautiful. She had been a runner up in a Chicago beauty contest and many of the men in the Nashville movement and throughout her career made no secret of their romantic interest in her. "The first time I saw her it was like looking at Maria from *West Side Story*," said Rodney Powell, a Nashville student and one-time boyfriend of Nash.²⁶ Perhaps these attributes, along with the sense of self-worth that her grandmother had so carefully instilled, contributed to Nash's self-confidence and propelled her to leadership.²⁷

Nash has said that after a few weeks non-violence became more than just a tactic for her; "applied religion,"²⁸ as she called it, became a way of life. "The movement," she said, "had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were

²⁴ CORE instruction sheet included as part of an internal memo of the National Student Councils of YMCA and YWCA, March 14, 1960. CORE Papers, SHSW

²⁵ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 208.

²⁶ Halberstam, *The Children*, 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ Matthew Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 43.

there. Like courage, and love for people. It was a real experience to be seeing a group of people who would put their bodies between you and danger. And to love people that you work with enough that you would put your body between them and danger."²⁹

The importance of personal relationships within the group was vital to the success of the Nashville movement, and undoubtedly to the movement as a whole. Like combatants in a war, the activists repeatedly cited not wanting to let the others down as a key motivator to overcoming their fears. The fear not just of physical harm, but of jail as well, was almost overwhelming in the beginning. Most of the participants, whether they were from poor or middle class families had been taught that jail was the ultimate humiliation. Yet, their loyalty to one another and to the idea of the Beloved Community helped them move past these fears. The Beloved Community was how the group thought of themselves and their vision for the future society they would help create. Nash later recalled how she sat in lectures on the Fisk campus dreading the end of class as it meant she would have to go downtown for a sit-in. She was so nervous that she couldn't remember the topic of the lecture, but she remembered the sweaty palm prints she left on the desk as she got up. She forced herself to go because she could not let down the people who were counting on her.³⁰

During the fall of 1959 the Nashville movement began conducting what could be called dry runs for the later sit-ins. The participants would go into stores and attempt to be served at lunch counters, and, when refused, try to talk to the store managers about the immorality of segregation.³¹ Although their efforts failed to desegregate lunch counters,

²⁹ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 131.

³⁰ Halberstam, *The Children*, 3-5.

³¹ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 126.

these tests were undoubtedly useful exercises for Lawson's group. The fear that Nash and others experienced was probably eased slightly by getting a feel for what the protests would entail. It is also likely that these initial tests strengthened the students' bonds with each other as they learned they could count on one another. In April of 1960, Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Nashville movement "the best organized and the most disciplined in the Southland."³² This success was due in no small part to the tremendous preparation the students had undergone.

On February 13, 1960, just two weeks after the first Greensboro sit-ins, the Lawson group began trying to integrate the lunch counters of Nashville.³³ On that first day, the group elicited little more than shock and some name-calling from the white community. In her role as the group's leader, Nash went from store to store checking on the students. "The waitress must have dropped \$2,000 worth of dished because they were so nervous," she later noted.³⁴ Getting through the first demonstration must have broken a psychological barrier for the students, but it didn't eliminate their fears. For weeks Nash dreaded the end of the school day, knowing that she would have to go to another demonstration.³⁵ Her fears were not eased by the lack of attention being paid to the protests outside of Nashville. On February 14 a tiny article entitled "Rebuffed in Nashville" appeared on page 30 of the *New York Times*. "About 100 students," the article noted, "ninety of them Negroes, sat quietly at lunch counters in three Nashville variety stores today. They were not served."

³² David Sumner, *The Local Press and the Nashville Student Movement, 1960*, 39.

³³ Dates for the first "official" Nashville sit-in vary widely from Feb. 6 to Feb. 28 depending on the source. However, the most consistently cited date is Feb. 13, which corresponds with the first mention of sit-in activity in the Nashville papers on Feb. 16.

³⁴ Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, 204.

³⁵ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 133.

During the first month, as the Nashville group strove to become as effective as possible, the students decided to change some leadership. The group emphasized communal decision-making. A central committee consisting of 30 to 40 students discussed or argued over goals and strategy.³⁶ However, many within the group began to feel that Nash's leadership skills and commitment made her the best choice to lead the central committee. She was articulate, sophisticated, beautiful, middle-class and light skinned enough to frequently pass for white. She was in the movement against racial injustice not because she experienced the worst of it, but because it was the moral thing to do.

Nash was, at this time, developing a consciousness about the movement that went far beyond the anger which prompted her initial involvement. At her first arrest in late February, Nash felt overwhelmed by fear and humiliation. But as the police fingerprinted her she experienced a personal revelation, "Who wanted to be white in the first place?" she asked herself.³⁷ This moment of epiphany clearly speaks to the internalized white supremacy felt by so many African Americans. Just as Garveyism helped Audley Moore see herself as beautiful, so too Nash's activism taught her that segregation had imbued her with a belief that white was better. Her grandmother's belief that whites were more refined was a result of a system that reinforced this idea at every turn. Advertisements for skin lighteners and hair-straightening products aimed at Black women were among the most tangible by-products of a culture that rewarded whiteness and rejected Blackness. A system of housing discrimination that kept Black people confined to certain neighborhoods; hiring practices which kept the overwhelming majority of Blacks

³⁶ Halberstam, *The Children*, 142.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

in the lowest paying, dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs; and a class hierarchy within the Black community which placed a premium on light skin, all combined to complete the indoctrination of African Americans to a society which made being "white" an objectively positive thing. Nash's work for the movement made her recognize and reject the psychological effects of segregation.

Nash was only involved in the movement for a few months before she began to question, not just segregation, but how the United States and its racist policies fit into the global picture. She equated problems of segregation and racism with the problems of Cuba and South Africa. She began formulating an argument that this cause was not simply about equality, but about the dignity of humanity; "Segregation reaches into every aspect of life to oppress the Negro and to rob him of his dignity in the South." She argued that separate but equal was impossible because of the stigma that went with separation. She also claimed that segregation demeans the segregationist.³⁸ Nash believed that segregation created a system of fear which affected the oppressors as well as the oppressed. While these ideas were not new to the civil rights movement, they represent Nash's transition into her own method of thinking critically about the issues and forming eloquent arguments.

Much of the power of the Nashville movement was based in religion. James Lawson's teachings were firmly based in Christian ideology. While preacher culture was pervasive throughout the movement and churches were an important source of organization and mobilization, Nash and the other Nashville students seem to have been somewhat different. They believed in the power of nonviolence with an almost mystical

³⁸ Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 44-47.

intensity; it was not merely an expedient means to an end. In his workshops Lawson evoked images of Jesus Christ as “a non-violent athlete,”³⁹ by using biblical passages that emphasized Christ as an activist.

Within these religious ideals, Lawson stressed that it was important to love the enemy. He wanted them to see the segregationists as human beings.⁴⁰ There seems to have been a sense that they could love the hate out of their oppressors. When the group published a statement of purpose, religion and love were the main themes:

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence, as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love...Love is the eternal motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man...It matches the capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.⁴¹

This was the foundation of the organization that elected Diane Nash as its leader.⁴² When James Bevel nominated her for the position she refused. He was not alone, however, in his belief that she was the best person for the job; he was seconded by many others. Ironically, considering the times, part of the reasoning was that Nash was a woman and would probably feel less pressure to exert her power. Finally Bevel made the case by saying that in times of crisis people are required to do, not what they may choose,

³⁹ Lawson PBS interview.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Statement of Purpose” as it appears in *The Voice of the Movement*, printed by the Nashville Student Nonviolent Movement. Undated. CORE papers, SHSW.

⁴² It should be noted that the students repeatedly insisted to the Nashville press corps that they were not led by one individual. This was certainly an attempt to protect both Nash and Lawson, who was being accused of having undue influence over the impressionable students and was eventually ousted by Vanderbilt as a result of the controversy. Interestingly, the students also claimed that the sit-ins were a spontaneous event inspired solely by the Greensboro action. See *The Nashville Tennessean* 3/2/60.

but that which their talents dictate. In a moment of terrible gender irony, Nash made a last ditch effort to excuse herself from the responsibility by claiming a medical condition: menstrual cramps. Bevel told her that people would help out when she needed them to and the discussion was over.⁴³

Nash was more afraid than ever. Returning home that night she was so terrified she could hardly stand. "This is Tennessee," she thought to herself, "and white people down here are *mean*."⁴⁴ She had good reason to be afraid. Not only were her fellow activists depending on her organizational and leadership skills, but now she was much more visible. Soon after she became chairperson, her picture appeared in the paper in an article about the sit-ins.⁴⁵ A few days later, as she checked on demonstrators downtown, a crowd of whites recognized her and began shouting that she was the one to get. At this point her fear was almost debilitating. She forced herself to make a choice -- either resign or deal with her fear. She took five minutes to decide; she would stay.⁴⁶

Police arrested the Nashville students, led by Nash, en masse on Saturday February 27. When the demonstrations turned ugly that day, police arrested not the violent and aggressive whites but the peaceful Black protesters who were absorbing cigarette burns, punches and verbal assaults. The following Monday, Nash stood in court and told the judge that the group chose to go to jail rather than pay fines which would "be contributing to and supporting the injustice and immoral practices that have been

⁴³ Halberstam, *The Children*, 143-44.

⁴⁴ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 208-209.

⁴⁵ Due in part to the somewhat amorphous nature of the organization, different sources give Nash different titles. I am using the title that Nash gives herself. See Powledge, 208.

⁴⁶ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, 201.

performed in the arrest and conviction of the defendants.”⁴⁷ It was the first time that Nash told a judge that she would not participate in an immoral system, but it would not be the last.

Nashville’s mayor, Ben West, was under intense pressure from the merchants to end the protests. West, a moderate, appointed a bi-racial commission to study the situation. The commission invited Nash and five other students to come to a meeting to discuss a resolution and the students responded with a good-faith halt to sit-ins.⁴⁸ In the meantime the judge and district attorney both told the local press that they would be willing to delay the grand jury proceedings of the arrested students to give the committee a chance to “confer with the principals in the controversy.”⁴⁹ If this was an attempt to pressure the students into accepting whatever compromise the committee offered it failed miserably. Although she believed the committee was “genuinely concerned” and “most fair,” Nash made it clear in her meeting with them that there would be no concessions on the main issues.⁵⁰ “I told them that no form of token desegregation [sic] would be acceptable as a solution in this problem.” Nash told the local paper. “I don’t think there will be any compromise on this as far as the students go.”⁵¹

Nash and the other student representatives issued a statement to the committee reaffirming their commitment to the issue of desegregation. “Because we have been denied these fundamental rights we feel as responsible citizens a moral obligation to protest these unfair impositions...Ours is a non-violent effort to focus sharply upon the injustice

⁴⁷ “75 Students Back In Jail” *Nashville Tennessean* [NT], 3/2/60 p. 2.

⁴⁸ “Racial Peace Parley Today” *NT*, 3/8/1960 p. 1.

⁴⁹ “Would Agree to Delay Sit-In Cases” *Nashville Banner* [NB], 3/7/60 p. 1.

⁵⁰ “Merchants to Give Views on Sit-Ins” *NB*, 3/9/60 p. 6.

⁵¹ “Students Reject ‘Token’ Service” *NT*, 3/9/60 p. 1.

of unfair color discrimination practiced in local eating facilities and to overcome traditional racial barriers.”⁵²

The store owners had a much different meeting with the committee. The national chains, Trailways and Woolworth's, kept their distance from the issue by claiming to be guests in Nashville. Woolworth's in particular tried to remove itself, stating that while they would not necessarily oppose desegregation “it is unrealistic to expect that Woolworth should take the initiative [in desegregating].” The local merchants claimed that desegregation would actually hurt business.⁵³

Despite the fact that the merchants had discussed the issues privately before meeting with the committee, it seems that not everyone was in agreement. Less than a week later, on March 16, the Post-House, the restaurant in the Greyhound Bus terminal, quietly served a group of four Black students, including Diane Nash, without incident.⁵⁴ More significantly, the event marked the end of the tacit ceasefire as well as the first victory for the activists. The students had little time to savor this success, however, as both sides redoubled their efforts.

Three days after Nash and her friends ate at the Post-House, police found explosives at the bus terminal in a clear sign of what other lunch counter owners could expect if they too decided to desegregate. Not without their own form of ammunition, African American activists indicated to the *Nashville Tennessean* that an informal boycott of downtown stores by local Blacks was underway.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ “Counter Owners Stand by Custom” *NT* 3/12/60 p. 1-2.

⁵⁴ David Halberstam, “Negroes Served at Bus Terminal” *NT* 3/17/60 p.1.

⁵⁵ “Ministers Urge Lunch Freedom” *NT* 3/20/60, p. 1.

On March 25, the first major sit-in effort in three weeks brought hundreds of demonstrators into downtown Nashville. The same day, in one of the most bizarre turns of the movement, Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington charged that this latest protest “was instigated and planned by, and staged for, the convenience of the Columbia Broadcasting System.”⁵⁶ Were the stakes lower the charges would have been seen for the laughable outrage they were. Instead the governor’s accusations stole the headlines and undermined the legitimacy of the Nashville Movement. A CBS news show called *FYI* had been filming the protests for a documentary on the students’ efforts, but quickly abandoned the project once Ellington’s leveled his charges. While *FYI* certainly would not have been the first news outlet to meddle with a story in the hopes of making it more exciting, the idea that CBS had coerced the students into doing something seems unlikely given the strongly independent streak of so many of the Nashville participants.

After *FYI* fled Nashville, Nash tried to regain the protests’ legitimacy. “We feel that this statement and our announced intention to continue the sit-ins should prove to the governor and anybody else who is interested that CBS had nothing to do with the Friday sit-in and that it and any future demonstrations come from the Negroes and only the Negroes,” she explained. The mayor’s committee had asked for another cease-fire, but the activists refused.⁵⁷

A few weeks later, terrorists bombed the home of the students’ lawyer, Z. Alexander Looby with enough dynamite to practically level the brick house.⁵⁸ Miraculously, no one was killed, but the Black community was outraged. With Nash at

⁵⁶ Charles L. Fontenay, “Ellington Says Demonstration for TV Benefit” *NT* 3/26/60, p. 1.

⁵⁷ David Halberstam, “Negro Sit-Ins to Resume Here” *NT* 3/30/60, p. 1.

⁵⁸ “Bomb Wrecks Looby’s House” *NB* 4/19/60 p. 1.

the head, three thousand citizens marched silently to the state capital and Davidson County Courthouse in what activists called the "Stride Toward Freedom."⁵⁹

Mayor West met the demonstrators on the steps and tried to assure them that he was fair and impartial, pointing out all that he had done for the Black community, and asking the marchers to join him in a prayer. Nash was not interested in hearing a political speech. In front of television cameras and three thousand demonstrators, Nash seized the moment and asked the mayor if he felt it was wrong to discriminate against someone based on race or color. West paused and conceded that yes, he thought it was wrong to discriminate in that way and the marchers burst into applause. "It was a moral question and one that a man has to answer, and not a politician," he said later.⁶⁰ The *Nashville Banner* reported that Nash then asked the mayor "whether he would use the prestige of his office to appeal to all citizens to end such discrimination, and West said: 'I appeal to all citizens to have no hatred, discrimination or bigotry.'"⁶¹ Clearly Nash and the student activists had seized the moment.

The Nashville movement widened into a boycott of downtown stores as well as demonstrations. While there is some debate over who initiated the boycott and which group was in charge of sustaining it, it was a successful operation. It came at Easter, a time when the downtown merchants were particularly vulnerable. The store owners and managers initially refused to make any concessions to the protesters. As Nash wryly noted, "It became apparent to me during the negotiations that the white southerner was

⁵⁹ "Thousands of Negroes March," *NB* 4/19/60 p. 1.

⁶⁰ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 209-10.

⁶¹ "West Tells 2,000 Marchers City's Laws to be Upheld" *NB* 4/20/60 p. 10.

not in the habit of taking the Negro seriously."⁶² However, by Nash's estimate the boycott was 98% effective.⁶³ By some calculations, Black shoppers spent some \$10 million annually downtown, which encouraged the stores to quickly capitulate, and by the end of May, downtown Nashville became the first Southern city outside of Texas to completely integrate downtown lunch counters.⁶⁴

In April, 1960, Nash attended what became the founding conference of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) held in Raleigh, North Carolina and organized by Ella Baker. Nash and the rest of the Nashville leaders found a philosophical soul mate in Baker. Baker had long advocated grassroots organizations which placed less emphasis on a few traditional leaders and put more decision making power in the hands of the group, and she saw great potential in the student-led protest movement. "Baker wanted to bring the sit-in participants together in a way that would sustain the momentum of their actions, provide them with much needed skills and resources, and create space for them to coalesce into a new, more militant, yet democratic political force," historian Barbara Ransby explained.⁶⁵ Ella Baker was instrumental in helping the organization get off the ground by raising \$800 and offering part of SCLC's office space as well as use of its mailing facility to SNCC. Baker was not interested, however, in having SNCC function merely as an arm of SCLC. She worked to prevent the group from being co-opted by the older, more established organization by strongly

⁶² Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 50.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 206; Sumner, *The Local Press and the Nashville Student Movement, 1960*, 39.

⁶⁵ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 239.

encouraging the students to remain independent from the SCLC and be their own leaders.⁶⁶

Ella Baker, also a Southerner, moved to Harlem just a few years after Audley Moore and found the same heady mix of politics and poetry, which had greeted Moore. Like Moore, Baker surrounded herself with a group of fellow intellectuals and activists, although she worked for the NAACP, rather than the CP. During WWII crisscrossed the country as director of branches for the NAACP at a time when membership in the organization was skyrocketing, and she was instrumental in turning the SCLC from a vague project into an actual organization with goals and leadership. In her role as “godmother” to the new organization, Baker provided inspiration to a new generation of activists, particularly the young women in the group.

Most of the students had never met anyone like her, and for women like Diane Nash, Baker offered “an alternative model of womanhood.”⁶⁷ Baker’s model was at once militant and reserved, radical and dignified. At a time when social standards for what constituted acceptable feminine behavior were rigidly inscribed, Baker must have been a revelation to the young women in SNCC. Baker’s influence went far beyond the area of gender. She encouraged the students to think on a grand scale and believe that they could make a difference. “Older people would look at you and say you were young and you would calm down when you matured.” Nash remembered. “So, she was the first older person I had known who was so progressive. And I needed that

⁶⁶ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*, 20-25.

⁶⁷ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 256.

reinforcement.”⁶⁸ While Baker provided mentoring and guidance for the students in SNCC, she allowed them to forge their own, new path.

SNCC adopted the same principles of nonviolence, love and religion that Lawson developed for the Nashville student movement. It is little wonder then that so many Nashville students also became members and leader of the new group, including Marion Barry, a Nashville participant who became the first chairman of SNCC. Some claim that Nash would have become chairman, but came late to the meeting and missed the vote.⁶⁹

Despite her lack of formal leadership title, Nash was an undeniably strong leader of the new group. Her official title of “office manager” seems to belie the influence she had in shaping the new organization.⁷⁰ The experience she brought with her from Nashville forced the men of SNCC to take her more seriously than they otherwise might have. As the only woman, Nash felt a distinct disadvantage at not being “just one of the guys.” There were times when she felt that they were “tolerating” her because they were afraid she would tell people that “these guys just really [weren’t] okay.” It didn’t hurt that she had received so much publicity, including an appearance on the cover of *Jet*.⁷¹

In February 1961, Nash and three other SNCC members went to Rock Hill, South Carolina. A group of students there had been convicted of trespassing for staging sit-ins and had chosen jail over bail. The SNCC students went to show their support and were promptly arrested after trying to get service at a lunch counter. They, too, chose jail over bail and were sentenced to thirty days. SNCC issued a press release calling for more volunteers to fill the Rock Hill jails. “Only by this type of action,” the release urged,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 259.

⁶⁹ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics*, 40.

⁷⁰ Robnett “Women in SNCC” 134.

⁷¹ Robnett, *How Long, How Long*, 102.

“can we show that the nonviolent movement against segregation is not a local issue for just the individual community, but rather a united movement of all those who believe in equality.” Initially, thirty days may have seemed like an eternity to the young activists, but Nash was surprised to find jail a rewarding experience. She was able to spend time with women who lived very different lives than the relatively privileged one she had always known. She also enjoyed the food, brought to the jail by local women in support of the students, which was not only delicious, but a reminder that others supported the cause.

It must have been, in a strange way, a vacation of sorts for Nash. For the first time in months she was free from responsibility and pressure. It gave her a chance to reflect on her future. She read Gandhi's autobiography and the Acts of the Apostles, both of which re-enforced her belief in the moral imperative of her cause.⁷² At the same time, Nash felt that she was not getting enough support from the administration at Fisk. The university seems to have been of two minds about the issue of student activism. The dean of women was glad that there were few Fisk women involved, but the president of the university made a statement in full support of the students and their cause.⁷³ Nash decided that she would rather be a full time activist than stay in an institution that she felt re-enforced the status quo. Instead she became a full-time, paid employee of SNCC and SCLC for the grand sum of \$25 per week.⁷⁴

In May of 1961, the Council of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to reprise the Journey of Reconciliation of 1947. It was an attempt to integrate interstate bus travel in

⁷² Halberstam, *The Children*, 268.

⁷³ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 207.

⁷⁴ Halberstam, *The Children*, 269.

the South, as had been guaranteed by the Supreme Court, and force the federal government to protect the riders. The national director of CORE, James Farmer, wanted the rides to "inspire local nonviolent action to remove the sin of segregation from our society."⁷⁵ On a practical level the rides were an attempt by CORE to make it "politically dangerous" for the federal government to sit idly by without enforcing federal laws.⁷⁶ However, the riders met with a violent and uncontrollable mob in Anniston, Alabama, which forced them out of the bus by setting it on fire and then attacking the riders as they tried to flee. A second bus met with a white mob, first in Anniston and then Birmingham, where the infamous police chief, Bull Connor, agreed to let the Ku Klux Klan have 15 uninterrupted minutes to beat the riders. The white riders attracted particular attention and James Peck and Walter Bergman were punched, kicked, stomped on and thrown over bus seats until both men were unconscious as the Klan screamed that they were "nigger lovers."⁷⁷ The viciousness of the attacks shocked the American public, including the organizers, who had never anticipated anything so horrific. The nation was transfixed by images of the flaming bus on the front pages of newspapers and by the bloodied and bandaged James Peck trying to explain the importance of the rides on national television. The future of the rides seemed doubtful at best.

When Nash heard about the violence her immediate reaction was that the rides absolutely must continue. She knew that there would always be violence and if the rides were halted because of it there would never be any progress. She later wrote, "Mob violence must not stop men's striving toward right. Freedom Rides and other such

⁷⁵ March 31, 1961 CORE press release, CORE papers, Box 20, folder 10.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 147.

⁷⁷ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 419.

actions must not be stopped until our nation is really free."⁷⁸ Undoubtedly she was thinking about people like Representative George Huddleston, Jr. whose reaction to the violence was:

Every decent Southern[er] deplores violence of any kind...Their [the riders] sole purpose in trespassing upon the south and its well established customs was to create a deplorable and disturbing situation...[they] got what they asked for.⁷⁹

Nash's fellow Nashville activist, John Lewis, had the same reaction as she did. The two immediately got to work organized more rides and riders, but it was not an easy task. Many felt it was too dangerous. Not only did a Justice Department official try to talk Nash out of continuing the rides, but the original riders warned the new recruits not to come, that it was a "bloodbath" and they would certainly be killed. The new riders took the warnings very seriously and tried to prepare themselves for the possibility that they would not return. Many wrote out wills or wrote letters and gave them to Nash to mail in the event they were killed.⁸⁰

Nash felt strongly that Martin Luther King, Jr. should be among the new riders. The vision of King walking into a segregated bus station would not only galvanize support for the rides within the movement, she believed, but would draw further national and international attention to the cause. While Nash undoubtedly had respect for King, she was not awestruck by him and always kept his role in the civil rights movement in perspective. Movement activist Henry Schwarzschild recalled Nash's sharp correction when he called King *the* civil rights movement, "I was told that he was the *symbol* of the

⁷⁸ Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 53

⁷⁹ *The New York Times*, May 17, 1961. p. 23.

⁸⁰ Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 53.

civil rights movement and please not to refer to him as its leader – a lesson which I have never forgotten, nor have I ever violated it.”⁸¹

When Nash called King in Atlanta he was less than receptive to the suggestion. Not easily discouraged, Nash drove with fellow Nashville movement alum, Rodney Powell, to Atlanta to pressure King in person. Nash pleaded with King, while Powell was more subtle in his approach. When told by his advisors that King would be too vulnerable, Nash shot back that the students were putting their lives on the line. One wonders what King and his group of advisors, particularly his father, “Daddy King,” must have thought of this outspoken young woman. These were old-fashioned men whose wives played second fiddle to their husband’s authority. These were men who were used to making decisions and taking the spotlight. These were the same men who had refused to recognize the invaluable work Ella Baker had done for the SCLC and had denied her a permanent position, in part because she was a woman.⁸² And yet, these men were forced to listen to a 22 year old woman imply that they were cowards. King did not join the rides.

Nash did not go on the Freedom Rides; it was decided that she should stay behind as organizer. Her importance to the effort was, once again, recognized by those outside of the movement as well as inside. On May 23, 1961 a two column article in the *New York Times* entitled, “Negro Girl a Force in Campaign; Encouraged Bus to Keep Rolling” details Nash’s crucial role in the continuing Freedom Rides and in her leadership in Nashville. Of particular interest is the discussion between Nash and the Justice Department: “It was as if I were talking to a wall, the [Justice Department] official said

⁸¹ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 283.

⁸² See Ransby for further info on sexism within SCLC.

later. "She never listened to a word." "We aren't going to stop, not now," she declared, "Why, those people in Alabama think they can ignore the President of the United States, and they think they can still win by beating us Negroes over the head."⁸³

The article makes clear Nash's growing political savvy as well as her steely resolve. In a single sentence she makes the southern states' refusal to comply with Federal law a personal insult to the power of the President. In a later article she further articulated her feelings about the rides, the jailing of the riders and the responsibility of the Federal government:

[H]ere are people acting within their constitutional and moral rights; they have done nothing more than ride a bus or use a facility that anyone else would normally expect to use any day of the year, but they have been confined and imprisoned for it. And somehow the Attorney General and the President of the United States and the Justice Department of the United States can do nothing about such a gross injustice.⁸⁴

In June Attorney General Robert Kennedy invited nine civil rights leaders, including Nash, to Washington for a "frank discussion" of the Freedom Rides and the direction of the movement. They asked him to help stop the violence against protesters, but he felt that a cooling off period was needed. According to *The New York Times*, Kennedy told the leaders that the rides "had made a point, but that nothing further could be gained at this time by continuing the demonstrations."⁸⁵ According to some sources, the Attorney General implied that he would help the student activists get funding for

⁸³ Halberstam, "Negro Girl a Force in Campaign; Encouraged Bus to Keep Rolling" *The New York Times*, May 23, 1961.

⁸⁴ Ahmann, *The New Negro*, 56.

⁸⁵ *The New York Times*, June 20, 1961.

voter registration work. He felt the vote was the key to desegregation, and it had the added bonus of being, at that time, much less likely to make headlines around the world.⁸⁶

SNCC almost fell apart over the issue of voter registration versus direct action, but once again, the guiding hand of Ella Baker intervened. Nash and others worried that taking the government up on its offer of help would be to cede too much control to an outside force. "It wasn't that I did not want to do voter registration," she said, "but that I did not want the voter registration to become SNCC's major reason for being. I didn't want it to be under the control of the Kennedy's."⁸⁷ Baker suggested that the students develop two separate wings of SNCC, but retain their organizational power base by remaining one group. The group selected Nash as the head of the protest, or direct action, arm.

In the fall of 1961 to everyone's shock, and many people's horror, Nash married Rev. James Bevel. They seemed an unlikely pair: Bevel, as everyone called him, was weird, unpredictable and an inveterate womanizer. He was frequently exasperating to those around him, but his dedication was fierce enough for people to tolerate him. Nash, on the other hand, was still the darling of many within the movement. The two had been working closely for months in a highly stressful situation and it is not difficult to see how even opposites would begin to form attachments to one another. Bevel later claimed that the marriage was one of convenience; that he needed someone to accompany him to Mississippi to protect him from charges of trying to move in on local women. Nash, however, remembered it differently. She believes that during long hours of hard work she and Bevel grew to respect and admire one another, and that seeing the passion, humor

⁸⁶ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 296.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 307.

and dedication to the movement eventually led to love.⁸⁸ Whatever the reasons, the surprising couple began their new life in Mississippi working for SNCC and, in Bevel's case, SCLC as well.

That fall, Mississippi authorities convicted Nash on charges of contributing to the delinquency of minors for conducting workshops on nonviolence in Jackson. She was sentenced to two years in prison and a \$2,000 fine. In April 1962, pregnant with her first child, Nash decided to drop her appeal. She issued a lengthy statement explaining her reasoning:

To appeal further would necessitate my sitting through another trial in a Mississippi court, and I have reached the conclusion that I can no longer cooperate with the evil and unjust court system of this state...[T]his is one of the basic tenets of nonviolence---that you refuse to cooperate with evil. The only condition under which I will leave jail will be if the unjust and untrue charges against me are completely dropped.

Some people have asked me how I can do this when I am expecting my first child in September. I have searched my soul about this and considered it in prayer. I have reached the conclusion that in the long run this will be the best thing I can do for my child. This will be a black child born in Mississippi and thus wherever he is born he will be in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free---not only on the day of their birth but for all of their lives.⁸⁹

She urged other proponents of nonviolence to have the courage of their convictions refusing to participate in an unjust system.

Nash further articulated her beliefs about the Southern court system later saying: [M]y objection is not to courts in general, for I think that a just system of courts is important to the type of government which we have in this country. My whole discussion here centers upon city, county and state courts of Southern states...I do not believe that these courts further

⁸⁸ Halberstam, *The Children*, 398.

⁸⁹ Memo from Diane Nash Bevel to Individuals and Organizations working for Civil Rights, April 30, 1962, box 47, folder 12, Braden Papers, SHSW.

democracy or anything worthwhile, but rather they are being used as machines with which to oppress men and to defile human worth.⁹⁰

Ironically, Nash found herself unable to surrender to white officials. Perhaps for the first time in Mississippi's history, nobody wanted to throw this Black woman in prison. She tried to turn herself in to the sheriff on April 27, but was told that she would have to see the judge. When she appeared in court on April 30, she was arrested for contempt of court for refusing to move out of the "whites only" section of the courtroom and was sentenced to 10 days in jail. In the meantime, the judge refused to discuss the other conviction and told her to return on May 14. Nash replied that she felt she had met her obligation and would not return to court unless forced, "I am here today and I feel that I have fulfilled the obligation of the bond requiring me to appear. I shall not be back."⁹¹ When prison officials released her after serving her 10 days Nash was informed that the date had been moved again to the May 21. On May 21 the judge again refused to listen to her attempt to surrender, instead the court claimed that Nash had forfeited bond for failing to appear for a hearing in February; Nash denied any knowledge of such a court date and asked to speak to the judge privately.⁹²

Once in chambers, Nash again reiterated her desire to remain in jail, but was told that she would have to do that at trial. According to the *News from Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc.*, Nash, ever the instigator, told the judge "that in case it would influence the speed with which he set the trial, that as long as she was free she planned to

⁹⁰ "New Direction for the Nonviolent Movement" Author believed to be Diane Nash, May 7, 1962, box 2, folder 4, Amzie Moore Papers, SHSW.

⁹¹ *News from Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc.* April 30, 1962, box 47, folder 12, Braden Papers, SHSW.

⁹² *News from Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc.* May 22, 1962, box 47, folder 12, Braden Papers SHSW.

continue, as she had been doing, her work to train people in Mississippi to use the technique of nonviolence to bring an end to segregation."⁹³ The judge told Nash that the court was too busy to hear her case until the next term.

The case slipped quietly away after that; apparently, not even officials in Mississippi wanted to put a pregnant, well-known activists woman in prison. Although her decision to surrender was genuine, Nash was far too politically sophisticated to have been unaware of the effect her pregnancy would have on the position of the court. Nor does it seem unfair to suggest that she would use it to her advantage. In a letter to Anne Braden the following year, Nash mentions her court case: "Nothing new on my case yet – If the judge says anymore, Bevel says I should just get pregnant again. Hmmm."⁹⁴

Although Nash was not imprisoned, her ongoing efforts to force the state's hand had a direct result on her fellow Mississippi activists. Taking their cue from Nash's refusal to move from the "white" side of the courtroom, two Jackson participants in the nonviolence movement also refused to move from the segregated side of the courtroom and were cited for contempt and jailed.⁹⁵

Later that month, Nash spoke at a Mother's Day mass meeting and reiterated her belief that it was her duty to her future child which led her to choose jail over participation in an unjust system. She also drew a parallel between the status of Black women and the status of the race as a whole stating, "when women decide to stand up,

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Letter from Diane Nash to Anne Braden, January 23, 1963, box 47, folder 12, Braden Papers, SHSW.

⁹⁵ *News from Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc.* May 21, 1962, box 47, folder 12, Braden Papers, SHSW.

the Negro race will be on its feet instead of its knees."⁹⁶ The analogy goes back to the ideology of the turn of the century clubwomen such as Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper. These women argued that because Black women were oppressed both as Blacks and as women only when their status rose could the race consider itself equal to that of whites.⁹⁷ Consciously or not, Nash was evoking the image of her foremothers in the quest for both civil rights and women's rights.

Diane and James were never afraid to confront issues which might make others uncomfortable. "White segregationists make a big thing of preaching that integration will cause mixed marriages and mongrelization of the white race," the couple wrote in a letter to the "Citizens of Cleveland" in June 1963 addressing the issue of miscegenation. "Mrs. Bevel is a light-skinned, straight haired and green-eyed Negro; so she along with the hundreds of thousands of Negroes with white, tan or brown skin or keen features and mixed blood are living evidence that southern white men are not serious about segregation."⁹⁸

In July of 1963, Nash was among a delegation of 300 women invited to the White House by President Kennedy for a conference on civil rights. Of the 300 women attendees, only 46 were Black, a small minority considering the topic. At the meeting Nash once again proved herself unmoved by the trappings of power, telling President Kennedy exactly what she thought was wrong with all of his civil rights initiatives. When she was done, Kennedy asked, "All right Mrs. Bevel, since you've torn our program apart, what would you suggest?" Nash told him that he had to come to

⁹⁶ Statement by Joan Trumpower, May 1962, micro 306, #4, Braden Papers, SHSW.

⁹⁷ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 43.

⁹⁸ Letter from James Bevel and Diane Nash Bevel to *The Peacemaker*, June 22, 1963, vol. 16, no.9, Microfilm 306, #4, Braden Papers, SHSW.

Mississippi to meet with the white leaders of the state and use his influence to change their hearts and minds. After the meeting, Nash told reporters that “the teeth [were] missing from the bill,” and that without fear of punishment, there was no reason for whites to obey the laws.⁹⁹

Although Nash was working on a national level, she was still active locally in Mississippi as well. She and Bevel drew up extensive plans for a “school for basic education in the Mississippi Delta.”¹⁰⁰ The school was to be based on the Highlander Folk School model, fostering community based activism by teaching nonviolence and citizenship skills such as literacy. Although there was correspondence between the Bevels and the Bradens regarding the school and potential funding, the school plan apparently never materialized.

On September 15, 1963, the Bevels felt devastated by the news of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Four girls died in the blast in Birmingham as they prepared for Sunday services. Diane and James, horrified by the unfathomable bombing, seriously discussed trying to find and kill the guilty party. Instead Nash devised a strategy for taking-over the state capital of Alabama. She arrived in Birmingham on Tuesday with a plan to create an overall-clad, nonviolent army with which the activists could lead a revolution in Montgomery. The elaborate plan covered even the smallest details such as recruitment, how to maintain morale and creating a flag and insignia. When Nash presented her ambitious plan to the SCLC, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other ministers viewed it as a joke, and nothing came of it. The Bevels next turned their

⁹⁹ “Rights Program Needs ‘Teeth’ in Miss. JFK Told” newspaper source unknown; hand dated, July 20, 1963, micro 306, #4, Braden Papers, SHSW.

¹⁰⁰ Proposal from James Bevel and Diane Nash, undated, micro 306, #4, Braden Papers, SHSW.

attention to Selma, Alabama where they believed there was great potential for activism. The couple began pressuring King and the rest of the SCLC to make Selma a focus for future projects.¹⁰¹

Nash and Bevel were an excellent team within the movement. “[N]o small measure of what we saw as Jim’s brilliance,” Andrew Young wrote, “was due to Diane’s rational thinking and influence.”¹⁰² Only a team as widely respected as they were could get away with the bit of back-patting Nash did in a 1965 article she wrote for *Ebony* called, “The Men Behind Martin Luther King.” Undoubtedly intended to shed light on the people whose hard work in the shadows allowed King to be the man in the public limelight, Nash praised the work of her husband and other activists.¹⁰³ Historian Anne Standley is critical of what she feels is Nash’s endorsement of the “prevailing view that the civil rights movement, and specifically SCLC, should be led primarily by men.”¹⁰⁴ Given Nash’s confidence in her own abilities to lead, and her disregard for institutional hierarchy, however, it seems unlikely that she would have deliberately implied anything of the sort. In addition, Standley objects to the fact that only three women are mentioned in the article, Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton and Carol Hoover. And while it’s true that these are the only women mentioned by name, the article also notes the work of the wives of SCLC leaders in support of the cause. If in fact Nash wrote the article, she makes a sly reference to herself stating, “Rev. Bevel is usually joined by his wife, Diane Nash Bevel

¹⁰¹ Ingram, 217; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 292-295; Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 538; Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 339-342.

¹⁰² as quoted in Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 341.

¹⁰³ However, it should be noted that no author is cited for the article anywhere in the magazine.

¹⁰⁴ Anne Standley, “The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement” 190.

(both of whom are founders of SNCC)."¹⁰⁵ It is also important to point out that there weren't many female leaders officially recognized as such at SCLC. If the point of the article was to highlight the leadership of that particular group, any author would have been hard pressed to include more women than Nash did.

At the same time, Nash's marriage to Bevel was falling apart. Bevel's womanizing tendencies had not ended when he married Nash and 1968 they divorced. Nash had moved back to Chicago with her children, but they were struggling to get by. Nash did not have a college degree which limited her job opportunities, and Bevel offered little to no financial support for their children. Yet, she managed to support herself and her two children and sent them both to college.¹⁰⁶

She never stopped being an activist, however. In 1966 she traveled to Vietnam at a time when the country was strictly off limits to Americans.¹⁰⁷ There she met Robert F. Williams and his wife Mabel, long-time advocates of armed-self defense for Blacks. As the head of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, Williams brought the chapter back from the brink of collapse by recruiting members from the working class, particularly Black women. Following a bitter debate, Williams was forced out of the organization by the national office because of his insistence that African Americans must be allowed to defend themselves against violence. In 1966 the Williams family was living in exile after fleeing trumped up kidnapping charges, and they shared Nash's belief that the Vietnam War was immoral and must be stopped. Although Nash and Robert Williams had some significant ideological differences, they had much in common, including a deep-seated

¹⁰⁵ "The Men Behind Martin Luther King" *Ebony* June 1965, p. 170.

¹⁰⁶ Halberstam, *The Children*, 533.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 629.

belief in the power of activism and suspicion for many of the national leaders of the movement.¹⁰⁸

Today, Diane Nash travels around the country talking about the movement and nonviolence. One of the most important messages she tries to pass along is the idea that one person can make a difference. The lessons she learned from James Lawson over 40 years ago still ring true. She is critical of the myths surrounding the movement, particularly the "great man" theory concerning Martin Luther King. According to Charles Payne, Nash understood that this myth caused people to wonder, "When will we get another leader like that?" instead of "What can I do?"¹⁰⁹ When a student asked her how to apply nonviolence to modern issues, she quoted Lawson, "You can think your way into a new way of acting, but you can also act your way into a new way of thinking."¹¹⁰

Diane Nash's experience was at once both representative of and anomalous to the larger experience of women throughout the movement. She was recognized for her wisdom and courage and trusted with leadership and responsibility. Yet, she often felt that her gender was a hindrance, and something to be overcome. In 1963, during the March on Washington, Nash was introduced from the platform as one of several women important to the movement. Along with Daisy Bates, Gloria Richardson, Myrlie Evers and Rosa Parks, she was invited to stand and receive applause; none were invited to speak.¹¹¹ It was, perhaps the only time in her civil rights career that Diane

¹⁰⁸ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 81, 164, 295.

¹⁰⁹ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 419.

¹¹⁰ Wheeler, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ Powledge, *Free at Last*, 538-539.

Nash was denied the opportunity to do what she seemed to do best: offer a direct challenge to the status quo.

THE STRUGGLE IS HARD

Despite their surface differences it isn't hard to find the parallels between the lives of Diane Nash and Audley Moore. Both women fall outside the traditional narrative of Black female leadership, which consigns women to the background, but shows them doing much of the organizing of the movement. The women of Montgomery, for example, had the initial idea for a boycott, but most history of the boycott focused attention on the story of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s emergence as a civil rights leader. Neither Moore nor Nash found their voice in the church, which is how so many women came to their activism.¹ Both seemed to have had a complex relationship to the gender hierarchy of their time, both resisting and maintaining it simultaneously.

For the first decades of civil rights history, historians focused on the "great men" of the movement, specifically the ministers, ignoring the contributions of the army of activists and volunteers – most of them women – whose work made the movement possible. More recently, as historians have begun a deeper examination of civil rights activism, the work of women has been explored at greater length. However, with a few exceptions, few scholars have examined how gender played a part in female (or male) activism. This has resulted in two problems. First, women who were leaders, such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, are inserted into the history in much the same way that the great men were, which implies that they were unique exceptions rather than representative of women activists as a whole. Miss Baker and Mrs. Hamer were exceptional, just as Dr. King and Dr. Shuttlesworth were, but there were thousands of

¹ See Robbnett and Payne for more on the role of the church in female participation.

men and women whose labors made their achievements possible. When one begins to tell the stories of other exceptional women, such as Nash and Moore, it becomes clear that while they are unique, these women leaders were not alone.

The second problem is that the work women did is presented as inherently different than that of men's, reinforcing the idea that there was "men's work" and "women's work." "Most accounts of the civil rights movement acknowledge the active role of women on the local level," Mark Hickman notes. "In a very real sense, women were the backbone of many local organizing efforts. All too often, discussions of those efforts focus on women opening their homes to civil rights workers, acting as chauffeurs, preparing and shuttling food and generally providing support services – 'women's work' (as is the case with most churches that were at the center of the movement."² Any discussion of an activist such as Moore, who organized, made speeches and went to jail, brings to the surface the difficulties inherent in determining what constitutes "women's work."

Charles Payne's article, "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," is one example of an attempt to correct the "great man" approach to civil rights history. Payne points out that scores of unnamed women did much of the work of the movement, and attempts to examine why women participated in the movement in such large numbers. His work centers on debunking many of the theories that have emerged to explain what he calls the "overparticipation" of women in the movement in general and SNCC in particular.³

² Mark S. Hickman, "Feminism: Black Women on the Edge," 5.

³ Charles Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized," 1. Payne is discussing only the participation of women in the Mississippi Delta, not the country as a whole, but the

“When explaining their own decisions to join the movement,” he states, “my respondents constructed answers primarily in terms of either religious belief or preexisting social networks of kinship and friendship. For many women, both factors seem operative.”⁴

What isn't clear from this statement is whether these reasons for joining the movement are significantly different from the reasons given by men. For a truly successful examination of the different experiences of men and women in SNCC one must look at both, rather than attempt to draw conclusions based on one side of the story.

In his later work, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Payne further examines the issue of gender within the movement and notes the difficulty of trying to pin down what constitutes leadership. “There is a parallel,” he writes, “with the way in which we typically fail to see women's work in other spheres...what we socially define as ‘work’ are those activities that are public rather than private and those activities for which we get paid...In the same way, the tendency in the popular imagination and in much scholarship has been to reduce the movement to stirring speeches – given by men – and dramatic demonstrations – led by men.”⁵ Of course, the other side of this coin is that there were women such as Nash, Baker and Moore, organizers who also gave stirring speeches and led dramatic demonstrations, which leads us to wonder how to position them within the context of the larger role of women in the movement.

Even in the attempt to uncover women's hidden work as Payne suggests is necessary, there is a danger of reinforcing gender stereotypes. In her article, “Hearing the Missing Voice,” Teresa Nance describes the three categories of Black female participants

conversation is still useful for examining what historians have said about gender in the movement.

⁴ Payne, “Men Led, But Women Organized,” 5.

⁵ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 276.

as “mama,” “activist” and “friend.” She quotes SNCC activist Charles Sherrod’s description of the “mama” as a woman who was “usually a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share.”⁶ This seems like an apt description of an activist, but by calling only those women who were officially recognized through the organizations as leaders “activists,” Nance reifies the categories which so long denied recognition to most female participants. The women who were willing to open their homes to “outside agitators,” in the face of economic and physical retaliation, were activists in every sense of the word. When one considers it likely that these “mamas” kept shotguns by the door, it seems that Nance missed an opportunity to examine the ironies of this sort of labeling.

While Payne gets to the heart of the biggest problem concerning the role of women in the movement, there remains the issue of how these women viewed themselves in terms of the gender roles of the day. It can be difficult to remove ourselves from our post-women’s movement world and see the situation for what it was at the time. “Even those [women] who did offer explanations [for the gender differential] were not confident about them or anxious to defend them,” concedes Payne. “It was also my impression that these gender differences were not something my respondents had give a lot of thought to, even though they were aware of them. Given that in 1963 gender was not as politicized a social category as it is now, this is not surprising.”⁷

While discussions of gender may not have taken the same forms they do today, it sells these women short to imply that they did not care about gender differences. “I ran into some real problems in terms of being the only woman at the stage where we were

⁶ Teresa A. Nance, “Hearing the Missing Voice,” 545.

⁷ Payne, “Men Led, But Women Organized,” 2.

just setting SNCC up as an organization. It was really rough not being just one of the guys. They did tend to look at me that way," Nash said about her experiences as a woman in SNCC. "However, they had to tolerate me because I had such a strong local base in Nashville, and at that time I had gotten probably more publicity than any other student in the movement and had been on the cover of *Jet* magazine a couple of times and things like that...Even though they disagreed a lot of times, they tolerated me because they didn't want me to say that these guys just really aren't okay."⁸

Clearly some women within the movement were questioning the gender hierarchy. Yet Payne's point is still an important one when looking back from our vantage point. Women like Moore may seem to be filled with contradictions. On one hand, she was at the forefront of breaking gender barriers with her activism. On the other hand she advocated that Black men and women had certain roles to play within the community, which reinforced gender stereotypes. She believed that "the black woman has the responsibility to establish values" for the Black community and that Black women should have more babies while Black men should be allowed to have more than one wife.⁹ Yet, she had no biological children and seems to have had anything but a traditional marriage. Payne's point that these women had a different view of gender from that of today is useful for understanding how Moore could reconcile these beliefs within herself.

Belinda Robnett's work examines how gender influenced the activism of women and the affect this had on the women themselves. "Gender was a defining construct of power relations," Robnett writes, "and shaped the structure of the movement. Men and

⁸ As quoted in Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 102.

⁹ *The Black Scholar* interview, 47; Memo, October 9, 1967 AM/FBI

women clearly had differential access to structural and institutional power.” These women usually had strong community ties through either church or volunteer work and were active in many areas.¹⁰ Robnett claims that these women occupied these positions not because of a lack of leadership experience, but because of “a social construct of exclusion.” Men were more likely to have access to traditional forms of leadership through institutions like the church and business ties, whereas women lacked these opportunities. Because of this, women occupied what Robnett calls the movement’s “free spaces.” They used their community ties to develop one-on-one connections, and had a nonhierarchical approach to leadership.¹¹ It was probably one of the most important areas in their lives where they felt they had real power and influence.

Robnett’s examination, however, is not without its flaws. She quotes Nash as stating that, “Before the women’s movement, men and women tended to see the males as naturally in the leadership positions...The thing that we didn’t do is take to the out-front positions, and when the TV cameras were around I know I for one and I think many other women were content to let the men who were interested in dealing with the press be with the press.”¹² However, Robnett fails to point out that, while this was true on the whole, Nash’s own experiences demonstrate the difficulties of making generalizations about an organization as vital and complex as SNCC. As leader of the Nashville movement, Nash was in the news and served as a spokesperson with regularity. Indeed, she confronted Nashville’s mayor West with questions about the morality of segregation, forcing him to admit, on camera, that segregation on the basis of race and color is wrong. One could

¹⁰ Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 19.

¹¹ See Robnett, “Women in SNCC” 131-165.

¹² As quoted in Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 101.

argue that gender may have worked in Nash's favor in this situation. Perhaps, given the tensions surrounding issues of Black masculinity, a man would have been unable to elicit the same answers from the mayor and even asking may have endangered his life. Indeed, Nash's experience with the judge in Mississippi could be interpreted in the same way. It seems unlikely that the judge would have had much sympathy for Nash's argument about the hypocrisy of the system if she had been a man or even a woman who was not pregnant. Robnett misses the opportunity to examine how traditional notions of gender may have worked in activists' favor.

"There was...the apparent contradiction between SNCC's male leadership and "macho" persona and what many considered to be its "feminine" style of operation, focusing on the creation of community and the empowerment of other," Lynne Olson writes. "Then there was the intricate relationship between the sexes, in which strong, independent black women deliberately pushed men to the forefront, content to remain in the background themselves and to have their men protect them. For centuries, black men in American had been cowed into submission by the brutality of racism, unable to defend themselves, let alone their wives and daughters, against abuse by whites."¹³

Olson's analysis, aside from ignoring the agency Black men had indeed been asserting for hundreds of years within the framework of oppression, normalizes the idea that women were in need of protection by men without dissecting the ways in which race and gender were constructed. Scholarship on civil rights workers, particular female activists, should be moving away from presenting them as selfless martyrs and toward a three dimensional portrait which includes their human foibles and weaknesses as well as

¹³ Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 270.

their courage. Works like Ransby's biography of Ella Baker and Chana Kai Lee's biography of Fannie Lou Hamer show women subject to the same human failings as the rest of us.

In addition, those books are milestones in the discussion of the tradition of Black female leadership. Both Hamer and Baker came from families which instilled in their children a sense of their worth as human beings. Hamer's mother carried a gun in her lunch pail to the fields every day to protect herself and Baker's family had a strong commitment to the African American community in their town. Nash and Moore represent integral parts in the continuation of this tradition. Nash's activism was a product of her time, place and temperament, but she could look to a long line of African American women who set leadership examples, including Audley Moore. Moore, for her part, worked with women from the generation before, such as Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune. So much attention has been placed on the students of the 1960s, as though they arrived at the threshold of the movement fully formed as activists. Instead they were the newest recruits to a struggle that had been going on for decades.

The students of the 1960s, like every new generation, brought a new vision to the movement, but it was not without its difficulties. Although Nash has remained deeply committed to nonviolence throughout her career, she never pressured anyone into adopting her philosophy. Her relationship with the Williams's is indicative of her belief that activism of all stripes was vital. Although committed to nonviolence, Nash recognized the impulse to strike back and never underestimated the difficulty of making a true commitment to nonviolence. Her own initial response to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing is testament to how hard it could be. "I think it's human to feel an

inclination for violence, to have it at least occur as a thought...I haven't come to the point where it doesn't enter my mind." she said. "But I think the important thing is to be able to process the situation until you don't just respond on your reflex."¹⁴ Indeed, she told Malcolm X that, "[t]hose who practiced nonviolent discipline never demanded it of others and many of the ministers did not understand nonviolence themselves."¹⁵

While Moore had a different philosophy, her position was not diametrically opposed to Nash's. Despite the fact that she was linked to some of the most radical groups of the twentieth century, some of which took a very militant approach to the freedom struggle, Moore did not call for the violent overthrow of the government. Indeed, at times she worked within the system to a much greater extent than Nash. She made her voice heard by running political campaigns, lobbying politicians and joining some mainstream organizations.

Both Nash and Moore recognized the importance of instilling in future generations a commitment to social activism. For her part, Nash continues to work with young people today. She gives frequent speeches to students, not only telling stories from the 1960s, but also talking about the important work that remains to be done. She believes that the mythologizing of King intimidates people and that if they understood the community effort behind the movement they would be more likely to become activists themselves. "Charismatic leadership has not freed us and it never will, because freedom is, by definition, people realizing that they are their own leaders," she said. "I don't care how great the man is, and up to now charismatic leaders have been mostly men – that

¹⁴ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, 217.

¹⁵ Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 579

should have clued us that something was wrong! – but no matter how great the person is, there is no one person who can or should free the many.”¹⁶

Moore worked with young people throughout her life, acting as a mentor to the students involved in RAM and the RNA, and never retiring from public life. She, like Nash believed that the wisdom of the movement had to be passed on. “The struggle is hard, but it’s rewarding....It’s not any one person’s bright idea, like it wasn’t my bright idea,” she said. “I got it from somebody....We hand down, sometimes you can’t even tell where you heard the words, but it’s like you’re unraveling a sweater or something, it starts, it’s going, the seeds are sown, the seeds are sown.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*,” 221-222.

¹⁷ Gilkes interview, 133.

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