



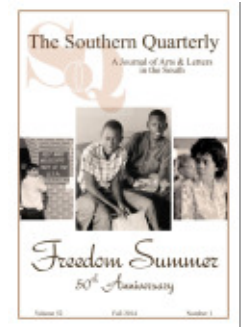
PROJECT MUSE®

Education for Liberation: Conference Keynote Address:
Friday, 20 June 2014

Charles E. Cobb Jr.

The Southern Quarterly, Volume 52, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 32-42
(Article)

Published by The University of Southern Mississippi, College of Arts
and Sciences



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/567246>



Charles Cobb at book signing, June 2014. Used by permission of the photographer, Carl E. Jones, Sr.

Education for Liberation

Conference Keynote Address: Friday, 20 June 2014

CHARLES E. COBB, JR.

I was invited to deliver this keynote address at the Freedom Summer conference here at Southern Miss to talk mainly about education, but before getting into that subject, we need to consider history. Listen to what Ella Baker, that great woman of social change told us in 1964:

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. That means we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. . . . I am saying as you must say too, that in order to see where we are going, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must *understand* where we have been.¹

We have two problems, it seems to me, with respect to how the civil rights movement is understood and this is relevant to what might be called Freedom Schooling. Historians more or less get the events right and have certainly spent much time on iconic figures and moments, but they provide little sense of how the movement really took shape. What were we in the freedom movement thinking and why? A certain sensibility—a movement

sensibility—is missing. I have been a news reporter for much of my working life and I learned early on in that business that what shapes—slants a story if you will—is what is left out of it more than any bias found in what’s put into a story. What we do not know more often than not leads us to wrong conclusions or incomplete understanding.

I mean, how does Charlie Cobb get from Howard University in Washington, DC, to Sunflower County in Mississippi? And why? More locally, and I think with greater relevance than my journey, how does Dorie Ladner get from Palmer’s Crossing (on the outskirts of Hattiesburg) into Mississippi’s student protest movement? Who is Dorie Ladner anyway? What was *she* thinking? How did she get to those thoughts as a young woman who decided to involve herself with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Mississippi’s freedom movement? To understand her progression, I think it is necessary to look at the grassroots where ordinary people lived their lives and at what they decided to do, which is more than a discussion of protest or membership in a particular organization.

With regard to the civil rights struggle, or as we more often called it, the “Freedom Movement,” John F. Kennedy, or Lyndon Johnson, or the US Congress did not wake up one morning and say, “Oh, racism, white supremacy and segregation are wrong; we’ve been neglectful and we’re going to do right now.” It didn’t work that way. So how should we understand what got these world leaders to change?

The second problem with history is that the way it’s written—very little of it connects to young people. Let me tell you a story: I did a book some years ago, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, with Bob Moses, one of the legendary figures in Mississippi’s movement, about his work today as a math teacher and how he connects that to Civil rights.

When the book was published, I was back in Mississippi. One of the things I was doing was bringing some copies to some of the people in Mississippi who had helped me by granting me access to students and teachers. Brinkley Middle School in Jackson, Mississippi, was one of the schools I went to and gave a book to the principal. Brinkley Middle School is in Medgar Evers’s old neighborhood. And while I was waiting for my ride, because I was getting ready to go up to the Delta with some friends, I was sitting on the steps of the school surrounded by these middle school students. Now, as it happens, the school is not only in Medgar Evers’s old neighborhood, it’s directly across the street from the Fannie Lou Hamer Public Library.

So I went into what I only half-jokingly call “old-guy mode” and decided to talk to these students about Mississippi’s movement and civil rights, and I

asked them about Medgar, of whom they didn't know anything. Except one kid did finally volunteer; he said something like, "*Well, didn't he get killed?*" And that's what he knew about Medgar Evers.

So I shifted gears as the car arrived to pick me up, and I pointed at the library. I said, "*Well, what about Fannie Lou Hamer? Can somebody tell me something about her?*" Well, none of these kids—thirteen, fourteen years old—knew anything about Mrs. Hamer. So standing up to walk to the car, I pointed to the library, and I said, "*Look. She's really important to the Civil rights struggle in Mississippi. You need to know something about her, and if you're interested, when I get back in a few days, I'll talk to you some about her, because I knew her.*" And I was getting ready to tell them a Fannie Lou Hamer story for, like most writers, I carry a pocketful of stories. I was sure mine would engage them and bring them all back to those steps when I returned. But when I said, "... because I knew her," this boy jumped to his feet. He was about thirteen years old. He stared at me in total amazement, and he said, I remember the words verbatim: "*Mr. Cobb, you was alive back then?!*"

So we've got this issue of historical memory or record, which has to do with the sense of time in young minds, in this case, me, the dinosaurs, Abraham Lincoln, slavery, and Frederick Douglass. For many of these kids, it's all just kind of lumped together in their minds—back there, then. If the public library was named for Mrs. Hamer, there couldn't possibly be anyone alive today, walking around, who knew her, making it hard for them to imagine that *I* was, "... alive back then." So we have this problem to solve with young people, of how you connect them in a real way with the past, in this instance to the freedom struggle past. A thirteen or fourteen-year-old shouldn't be startled, at least in the year 2001, to meet someone involved in the 1960s struggle. I mean, this is not 2109, when there will be real grounds for being startled at meeting someone like me born in 1943 and politically active in the 1960s. However, to be perfectly frank, the southern freedom struggle barely exists in young black minds, and, indeed, in the black community generally, outside of celebrated iconic moments.

Education and freedom are linked and it is important that this be understood, especially by young people. There is some history to this point so first, quickly and in a broad stroke, I want to look at some of that social history which confirms this basic fact. Secondly, since I come out of the southern freedom movement and not the academy, I want to share with you some experiences that have shaped my own perspective. Both of these contain lessons that may be useful today.

The Founding Contradiction

Consider these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Thomas Jefferson, who became the third President of the United States, authored these now legendary words of human rights and human dignity, and felt that nothing he achieved was greater than having written them. But Thomas Jefferson was also a Virginia slave owner. Therefore, a large question nags: how could a man who owned human beings as property—as *livestock*—and who considered it his right to own them, have penned the words we find in the Declaration of Independence?

This is what I call *the founding contradiction*, and I think this contradiction is at the root of what has been a continuing struggle over what we are to be as a nation because, right from the beginning, this country’s decision-makers wrote off certain categories of people as being ineligible for full citizenship. I know the black experience best, but variously, women, Latinos and Latinas, Native Americans, Asians, homosexuals, and, yes, poor whites also, have been dubbed not qualified for full citizenship. Barack Obama’s first presidential election in 2008 didn’t really change the continuing effects of this founding contradiction because it is embedded so deeply in our US culture. From the days of this nation’s founding, nowhere has this contradiction been more consistently destructive than in education.

First, it was illegal to educate slaves. Slavers and their supporters correctly realized that slaves with education would be discontented slaves and, therefore, dangerous slaves, rebellious slaves. So, for example, in 1831 Mississippi’s legislature passed a law that required all free blacks to leave the state so that they would not be able to educate or incite the slave population. This legislation also required that any black preacher would have to be given permission to speak before appearing before a congregation.

Not surprisingly, education went underground. Indeed, you find the earliest organized black resistance in America in efforts to teach and in efforts to learn how to read and write. What is now Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, began before the Civil War beneath an oak tree, with a free black woman named Mary Peake secretly teaching slaves to read and write. The tree is still there on the Hampton campus, and is appropriately named Emancipation Oak.

In the Reconstruction era that began shortly after the Civil War, educators and missionary workers who came south to establish black schools were surprised to find that, despite having been illegal in all of the states of the defeated Confederacy, some schools had already been established. During slavery, black southerners had built, funded, and maintained almost five

hundred small schools. One result was that by 1865 (when the Civil War ended), ten percent of slaves had secretly learned to read and five percent had learned to write. Yes, I can do the arithmetic and know this still leaves some ninety and ninety-five percent unlettered. But think about the circumstances in which this education was accomplished the next time you sigh and wonder if you're ever going to get anyplace in your efforts at social change.

It was freed slaves, recognizing the importance and power of education, who led the way to public education. Before Reconstruction, there were no statewide, tax-supported education systems anywhere in the country. It was the black presence in the Reconstruction legislatures of the South that drove this effort at creating public schools.

Notwithstanding promising progressive first steps at social change following the Civil War, Reconstruction lasted less than a decade. As the federal government withdrew its protections, the white supremacists, who had seceded from the Union, regained power—what they call the “Redemption.” It was violent and hostile to black power in the decision-making process. These words are from a leaflet of Louisiana’s “White League,” an organization of former Confederate soldiers and businessmen: “Can you bear it longer, that negro ignorance, solidified in opposition to white intelligence, and led by carpet-bag and scalawag impudence and villainy, shall continue to hold the State, your fortunes and your honor by the throat . . .” (United States 614). The League seized control of Louisiana’s state government in 1874. Across the South, in addition to obliterating black people’s newly-gained political franchise, their education was targeted. In Georgia, for example, in the year following the Civil War, some 8,000 blacks were attending public schools; in 1916, only 310 were enrolled in public schools (Mintz & McNeil).

More insidious than the simple denial of any public education at all in many places was that educational content became the ways and means of teaching inferiority. The best way to keep a person a slave, after all, is to keep him or her ignorant, persuade him or her that mired in ignorance is their proper place. “Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave,” wrote the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, quoting his so-called “owner” who had quarreled with his wife because she was teaching Douglass to read and write. And despite heroic efforts by teachers in many schools, public education became an institutional instrument wielded by the state for doing this deliberately and systematically—a problem that is still with us.

Freedom Schools of the “Mississippi Summer Project” and Today!

In 1962, when I began working as a SNCC field secretary in Mississippi, one of the things that surprised me was the number of new school buildings in

black communities, especially in the Delta cotton country of the state. It didn't take me long to realize that with poorly stocked libraries and labs, underpaid teachers kept on tight leashes, and the practice of shutting down schools to send black school kids to the fields to pick or chop cotton, these schools I was looking at—new on the outside—continued the old tradition of inferior education for black people—what can be called “sharecropper education.” The schools were shells established to create the illusion of *separate but equal*. In fact, the future the state envisioned for black students was a future as sharecropper, maids and yard workers, or menial labor of some sort. For those desiring to be teachers, doctors, lawyers, or professionals for which higher education was required and not available in one of Mississippi's historically black colleges, the state offered scholarships to out-of-state colleges and universities in order to head off challenges to the state's all-white colleges and universities. Ironically, even though they were shells, these new school buildings represented a sort of progress. A little over a decade before I began working in Sunflower County state researchers found that sixty nine of ninety four public schools met in black churches.

The progressive or moderate white position then, and reason for state research into black schools, was to actually try for separate but equal. Of course, Mississippi was too poor to even begin fashioning two separate but equal school systems, so dialogue about making such an effort quickly died with the realization that the state had no money for it and white rage over the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

Now this is a short version of a very complex history—three centuries of history. But even if you find it interesting, a question may be forming in your mind: How useful is it in terms of our struggle today? A few seconds ago I ended my brief historical discourse at 1954. Let's move forward ten years to 1964. We—mainly SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), with the encouragement and assistance of local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leaders—had been working at voter registration in Mississippi for over three years. There had been much violence and intimidation aimed at halting our efforts. The federal government offered no protection and the country was not paying attention. So we decided that in order to get the attention that we needed, our black coalition had to bring the country's children (especially whites) down to Mississippi to help us, to face the kinds of risks we faced. And we did that, organizing about a thousand college students to come down and work with us in what we called a “Mississippi Freedom Summer.” One of these student volunteers, along with two experienced companions, got murdered by Ku Klux Klansmen before we even got started. But that's not the story I'm here to tell you today.²

Because the link between education and liberation had become absolutely clear to us in our work, we decided to organize “Freedom Schools” as part

of freedom summer. As we put it in a proposal: it was the responsibility of the movement “to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions.” As you can see from these words, we were not talking about remedial reading, writing and arithmetic, although we planned to address that too in our Freedom Schools. The state responded the way the slavers one-hundred years before might have responded, by passing legislation that made it illegal to conduct any kind of school without a license. Doing so could result in anywhere from thirty days to six months in the county jail.

Why do I tell you this? Because as terrible as the bombings were, and the beatings and the murders, and all of the other reprisals, what we were really always up against, was the state. Mississippi’s power structure recognized, as did state governments all across the South, and as did their slaver forebearers, that an educated population, a population raised from unconsciousness to consciousness, is a dangerous population. A whole way of life can become unraveled when people begin thinking!

That brings us to schools today, and now, I am *not* just talking about the South. I do not here plan to talk about testing, teacher pay, class and school size and any number of other specific things that certainly have to be grappled with in terms of school reform. I want to ring an alarm bell. We are in the midst of a crisis that requires urgent action. The dimensions of this crisis are frightening but I cling to the idea that it is not too late. You will recall that when I began speaking to you, I spoke of “the founding contradiction,” which fundamentally wrote off groups of people as ineligible for full citizenship. Civil rights legislation and the like, notwithstanding, it is no exaggeration to say that in our public schools, a huge chunk of the population continues to be written off. Though I’ve been officially talking to you about education, I’m really talking to you about the struggle to help young people stay alive. White-sheeted Klansmen may no longer be rampaging through communities, but death is on a rampage—unnecessary death. Homicide is the second leading cause of death among young people between the ages ten to twenty-four. In this age group, it is the leading cause of death for African Americans, the second leading cause of death for Latinos and Latinas, and the third leading cause of death for Native Americans. In 2004, 5,292 young people in this ten- to twenty-four-year-old age group were murdered at an average of fifteen each day. Persons under the age of twenty-five accounted for nearly 50% of those arrested for murder (Lebrun 11).

There was no great concern shown by the media in December when James Fox of Northeastern University released his 2008 study called *The Recent Surge in Homicides involving Young Black Males and Guns: Time to Reinvest in Prevention and Crime Control*. There should have been! According to Fox’s study of national crime statistics, “From 2002 to 2007, the number

of homicides involving black male juveniles as victims rose by 31% and as perpetrators by 43%.” The report also says that this “was consistently true for every region of the country.”

There is mental illness here; slave-thought that imprisons minds as thoroughly and effectively as metal bars imprison the body. Among boys, 42% of high schoolers and 32% of middle schoolers believe that it is okay to hit or threaten a person who makes them angry. One in five—20%—of the girls agree. These numbers come from the Josephson Institute 2006 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth.

In highlighting the failure of our education system, Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund has characterized it best, I think, calling what I have just described to you the “cradle to prison pipeline.” And here are more numbers from her organization’s research:

Children in the most economically depressed communities are at high risk of low achievement and are often stuck in under-funded, overcrowded schools. Poor urban schools have the highest numbers of teachers who are inexperienced or do not have degrees in the subjects they teach. Eighty-six percent of Black, 83 percent of Latino and 58 percent of White fourth-graders cannot read at grade level; and 89 percent of Black, 85 percent of Latino and 59 percent of White 8th graders cannot do math at grade level. Black students are more likely than any other students to be in special education programs for children with mental retardation or emotional disturbance. Black and American Indian children are almost twice as likely as White children to be retained in a grade. The public school suspension rate among Black and American Indian students is almost three times that for whites. Black, Latino, and Native American children are more than twice as likely as White children to drop out of school. According to the US Department of Education, only 59 percent of Black and 61 percent of Latino students graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma in 2006. When Black children do graduate from high school, they have a greater chance of being unemployed and a lower chance of going to college full-time than White high school graduates. Only 50,000 black males earn a bachelor’s degree each year, but an estimated 1 in 3 Black men ages 20-29 is under correctional supervision or control. Approximately 846,000 Black males

were incarcerated in state or federal prisons or local jails at mid-year 2008. (Children's Defense Fund)

If I were young and black, I'd have to say, "We are being killed." I'm old and black so I say, "My children are being killed." I also have to say, I'm not going to just stand around and do nothing about it.

The expressed commitment to education so often and so loudly proclaimed by local and national public figures is hardly confirmed by the reality one encounters in cities and many rural communities. For the most part, public schools that serve African Americans, other minorities and the poor offer a 21st century version of "the sharecropper education" I encountered in Mississippi forty-five years ago. In my hometown, Washington, DC, the typical public school twelfth grader graduates able to read, write, and calculate at an eighth grade level. These students are no better equipped to function in today's high tech society than the sharecroppers we encountered on Mississippi plantations were equipped to function in an industrial society requiring reading and writing literacy; these youths today in some ways are worse off than their 20th century counterparts. We see many of today's sharecroppers behind the lunch counters of fast food chains and behind prison walls—the new plantations, complete with "darkies" singing in the yard.

Although there is a rough consensus that inner city public schools in particular do not educate, there is no consensus on fixing these schools. Rather, school systems offer flight as a response to their failed institutions—moving some students, abandoning a great many more. Among the methods used to duck the issue of fixing public schools are magnet schools, charter schools, vouchers for private schools and, especially in the South, "academies." And while I am certainly willing to acknowledge that these all can have merit as part of a school "system," they become harmful when used as instruments—excuses—not to fix our public schools.

The roots of the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the summer of 1964 were lodged here in this idea of creating comfortable space for the expression and exploration of ideas. In short, the idea of a liberating education, which also defined Freedom Schools, grew out of the political and intellectual ferment of the civil rights movement. I think of this as I consider public schools today, which insofar as I have observed them in inner cities, seem to be doing little more than creating 21st century sharecroppers—illiterate and unprepared for the demands of this new century.

Brown University

NOTES

¹ Quote introduces Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*.

² On June 21, 1964, three CORE workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—disappeared while they were investigating a church bombing. They were later found murdered near Philadelphia, in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Their deaths signaled a tragic beginning to Freedom Summer.

WORKS CITED

- Children's Defense Fund. Oct. 2009. Cradle to Prison Pipeline Fact Sheet. Washington: CDF, 2009. Web. 2014.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* [1845]. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.
- Fox, James Allen, and Mark L. Swatt. *The Recent Surge in Homicides Involving Young Black Males and Guns: Time to Reinvest in Prevention and Crime Control*. Boston: Northeastern University, 2008. Web. 2014.
- Josephson Institute. Center for Youth Ethics. *The Ethics of American Youth: 2006 Report Card*. Los Angeles: Josephson Institute, 2006. Web. 2014.
- Lebrun, Marcel. *Books, Blackboards, and Bullets: School Shootings and Violence in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009. Print.
- Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2013). The State of African Americans in the South. (ID No. 3177). *Digital History*. Web. 2014.
- Moses, Robert P., and Charles E. Cobb. *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002. Print.
- Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.
- United States. Congress. "Condition of the South." *Reports of Committees of the House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-third Congress, 1874-75*. Rpt. 26. Washington: GPO, 1875. Print. Congressional Series of United States Public Documents. *Google eBook*. Web. 2014.