

FANNIE LOU HAMER, "WE'RE ON OUR WAY"  
(September 1964)

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**Abstract:** "We're on Our Way" is among the best of all the surviving speeches delivered by civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Our rhetorical analysis of this speech unpacks the complex rhetorical strategies Hamer utilized to encourage civic participation among her audience of oppressed Delta blacks. Through the adoption of multiple interrelated personae and the recitation of two pivotal narratives, Hamer challenged white supremacist terror and instilled a sense of moral obligation to take action among her audience members.

**Keywords:** Fannie Lou Hamer; civil rights movement; grassroots activism; Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; persona; narrative

As Fannie Lou Hamer arose to speak in the sweltering summer heat of the Mississippi Delta, the forty-six year old former sharecropper likely had just a bit more spring in her badly damaged step. Unlike many of the public speeches that took her to all corners of the country, this one would take place just twenty-six miles from her home in Ruleville—the Sunflower County seat of Indianola. No doubt Hamer had mixed emotions about Indianola, the site of both personal humiliation and civic pride. But the opportunity to address her friends, extended family and neighbors in Indianola, two long years in the making, no doubt enlivened the speaker and her listeners assembled at the Negro Baptist School.<sup>1</sup> But something else was different about this particular speaking occasion.

Hamer and her fellow organizer and confidante, Charles McLaurin, who also worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), took note of a very conspicuous white man at the front of the room. They had likely met him before at civil rights rallies in Greenwood and Hattiesburg. Unlike most white men at civil rights meetings in Mississippi, however, he was not a local undercover police officer gathering intelligence. Instead, he had traveled all the way from Chicago, bringing his expensive recording equipment and his interests in the sounds of the movement south at the invitation of SNCC's executive secretary, James Forman. Alan Ribback readied his microphone and reel-to-reel recorder for the woman he had come to witness belt out stunning renditions of "This Little Light of Mine" and "Go Tell It On The Mountain" before mesmerizing her audience with her stories of Jim Crow's injustices—all without notes or a memorized script. As movement orators went (and the movement had

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many), Ribback knew that Hamer's voice was unique, profound, and always impassioned; he had experienced it several times first-hand.<sup>2</sup>

Most Americans, however, have never heard of Fannie Lou Hamer. Those who have usually know of her 1964 testimony before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention (DNC). Yet few know about her inspirational orations before local audiences in Mississippi. It is thanks to Ribback, and others who recognized the significance of her message and recorded her addresses, that we are able to study Hamer's significant contribution to the grassroots contingent of the black freedom movement.<sup>3</sup> Ribback's forty-five minute recording of this particular speech, "We're on Our Way," is among the best of all the surviving speeches Hamer delivered. Several factors contribute to its exceptional status. First, the lengthy recording of this long-awaited speech reveals the remarkable tonal range and visceral power of Hamer's voice, demonstrating that this speech was even more passionately delivered than her more well-known DNC testimony. Second, in her attempt to encourage voter registration among Delta blacks, Hamer seamlessly wove constitutional principles with biblical promises inventing a complex rhetorical strategy that she would draw upon over the next several years of her activist career. Third, the twin narratives that served frequently as anchors for her critique of the state's violently repressive Jim Crow system—her attempts at voter registration in 1962 and her beating in a Winona jail in 1963—receive their most detailed articulations. For these reasons, we contend that although Hamer's Indianola address has received only scant attention, it is deserving of more careful consideration.<sup>4</sup>

Our rhetorical analysis of "We're On Our Way" unpacks the complex rhetorical strategy Hamer utilized to encourage civic participation among her audience of oppressed Delta blacks. To promote voter registration among an audience that had been exploited and intimidated for centuries, Hamer not only had to inform Delta blacks of their rights and encourage them to see themselves as agents of change, she also had to undermine the white supremacist terror that bound their potential. Hamer adopted multiple interrelated personae in response to the complex situation she faced: identifying herself as a fellow black Deltan, distinguishing herself as a prophet called by God to interpret "the signs of the times," and appointing herself as a religious leader sent to preach "relief to the captives" (46, 14).<sup>5</sup> What's more, Hamer both constructed and transitioned between these personae through two pivotal narratives, namely, the testimony of her initial registration attempt and her test of faith in the Winona jail cell. Characterizing Mississippi blacks as the most oppressed class of people in the United States, Hamer drew parallels between their experiences with segregation and the oppression Jews suffered in Egypt. Hamer used this scriptural assurance to both strip white supremacy of its intimidating force and to promote black civic assertion as a moral imperative—action necessary to save the crumbling nation. Ultimately, we suggest that rhetorical analysis of this overlooked speech within the activist career of an unlikely and under-celebrated movement participant sheds light upon the various strategies and voices that propelled one of the most famous social movements in our democracy's history. To demonstrate these claims, our article begins by providing background information about Hamer and her intersection with the grassroots contingent of the civil rights movement. We then delve into a textual analysis of her Indianola speech, concluding with a consideration of Hamer's lasting legacy.

*"Ruralest of the Ruralest, Poorest of the Poorest, USA"<sup>6</sup>*

Fannie Lou Townsend was born in Tomnolen, Mississippi on October 6, 1917.<sup>7</sup> The youngest of twenty children born to Lou Ella and James Lee Townsend, Fannie Lou experienced extreme poverty in the midst of considerable wealth.<sup>8</sup> Her family sharecropped for most of her adult life on the E. W. Brandon plantation outside of Ruleville, Mississippi in Sunflower County. That method of farming, only slightly more benign than the Civil War-era system of slavery it had replaced, typically functioned as a form of debt peonage wherein poor blacks and whites farmed land owned by wealthy whites in exchange for the rudiments of daily life: a small shack, food provisions, seed, fertilizer and other necessities—all of which had to be purchased at the plantation commissary and often on credit. The yield from the year's cotton harvest was to be split between landowner and sharecropper. But because many sharecroppers could not read or do basic arithmetic, they were at the mercy of the plantation owner once the cotton crop had been picked and debts were to be settled.<sup>9</sup> Conditions were so desperate in the Townsend household that the family often "scrapped" cotton, which meant that they gathered cotton that had not been picked completely the first time around. Fannie Lou remembers her mother tying rags around her children's feet to protect them from the punishing cold as they scrapped cotton on local plantations.

Croppers and their entire families typically worked from "kin till cain't" (can see till can't see) six days a week to try and come out ahead of that year's expenses. Most often, families did not break even, forcing them to work off the debt in the succeeding year. While sharecroppers barely eked out an existence, white plantation owners in the Mississippi Delta often became wealthy on the backs of black laborers. Because her parents needed her labor in the cotton fields, Fannie's formal education stopped at age twelve. It was in this economic context that Fannie Lou Townsend came of age, and it was this same context of oppression that she would rail against for most of her life. The system had badly stunted her development—physically, emotionally, and educationally—and at an early age she had become aware of its devastating effects. To her mother she confessed a wish that she had been born white. But her mother would not allow her family to envy whites. Carefully emphasizing the interconnection between the races, Mrs. Townsend insisted that the exploitative system of sharecropping did not leave white people unscathed. Hamer remembered her mother working in the fields or cleaning their small shack while singing, "I would not be a white man//White as a drip in the snow//They ain't got God in their heart//To hell they sure must go," which she would follow with the related stanza, "I would not be a sinner//I'll tell you the reason why//I'm afraid my Lord may call me//And I wouldn't be ready to die."<sup>10</sup> Beyond instilling a sense of race pride in her daughter, Lou Ella's allusion to Divine justice left Fannie Lou with an understanding that the races were inextricably bound, both ensnared by segregation and in need of one another to liberate themselves from its devastating effects.

Inborn dignity coupled with a resolute faith in God, were the guiding lights in the Townsend house. Fannie Lou consequently embraced her Baptist upbringing; her father James Lee preached, and she often performed readings and led the singing at her local church. Much later in her adult life, Hamer would frequently and fondly describe to interviewers and friends

her baptism in the Quiver River; it was an event and a calling that animated her belief that a just God would not idly assent to the race-based victimization she bore witness to daily.<sup>11</sup>

In 1944 and at the age of 27, Fannie Lou married Perry "Pap" Hamer, a sharecropper on the neighboring Marlow plantation. There the clearly gifted young woman was promoted to "timekeeper," a position of considerable trust and importance that involved serving as a go-between with the plantation owner's family and the sharecroppers who worked the land. Fannie Lou Hamer kept records and occasionally weighed the day's cotton. Hamer's resistance to Mississippi's demeaning system of Jim Crow extended to the plantation owner's home, where she also cooked and cleaned for the Marlow family. Later in life, she regaled audiences with tales of trying on Mrs. Marlow's clothes and perfumes, luxuriating in the family's bathtub, and eating *before* the family dined.<sup>12</sup> But these transgressive moments were furtive and individual, hardly the sort of sustained and public resistance that would typify a movement. The Hamers eventually adopted two daughters, Dorothy and Vergie, and passed the 1950s struggling to survive amid the nation's post-war prosperity. Other black Mississippi residents struggled to maintain a privileged way of life they had known since at least the close of the nineteenth century.

### *"A House Divided Against Itself"*

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Announced on May 17, 1954, the *Brown* ruling outlawed school segregation, while catalyzing both civil rights activists and white supremacy's defenders. The latter group quickly organized, sensing that its cherished way of life was under direct assault by an alleged communist-inspired federal government. Barely two months after the *Brown* ruling, prominent attorneys, bankers, and merchants gathered in Indianola, Mississippi to form the state's first White Citizens' Council, an organization created for the sole purpose of maintaining segregation.<sup>13</sup> Known as the "Klan in suits, not sheets" for its upper-middle class membership, Councils quickly sprang up all over the Deep South, but the counter-movement was headquartered in Mississippi. While the organization claimed publicly to deplore acts of physical violence and intimidation, it resorted to all manner of financial and rhetorical terrorism to mitigate the effects of *Brown*. More specifically, would-be black voters could expect several things upon an initial attempt at voter registration: job termination, spousal job termination, required debt payment on outstanding loans and mortgages, and always, the specter of publicity in the local newspaper.<sup>14</sup> As we will see, the plantation owner for whom Fannie Lou Hamer worked knew about her trip to Indianola and the Sunflower County Courthouse before she ever made it back home.

If intimidation by the Citizens' Councils was not enough to scare off potential voters or school desegregationists, there was always the looming fear of lynching and murder. Voting rights advocates Reverend George W. Lee and Lamar Smith were both murdered—Smith in broad daylight on the courthouse lawn in Brookhaven—for getting out of their appointed "place." Fourteen-year-old Chicago youth, Emmett Till, was infamously lynched only two weeks after Smith's murder (August 28, 1955), for allegedly whistling at a white woman, just miles from Hamer's home in Ruleville. In fact, the brother of accused murderer and kidnapper J. W.

Milam was a police officer in her hometown; S. L. Milam paid the Hamers more than one late-night visit. Not long after Till's murder, and the acquittal of defendants Milam and half-brother Roy Bryant, Dr. T. R. M. Howard, who headed the Regional Council of Negro Leadership from his home in the all-black community of Mound Bayou, fled the state, supposedly in a hearse-driven casket out of fear for his survival. NAACP activist and George Lee's close friend, Gus Courts, was badly wounded in late November 1955 by shotgun blasts while working in his grocery store in Belzoni. Courts and his family fled north in the aftermath of such violence. As if to punctuate the deadly year, gas station attendant and Glendora resident Clinton Melton was murdered in early December by J. W. Milam's best friend, Elmer Kimball, for putting too much gas in Kimball's truck. Despite a white eyewitness, Kimball was acquitted by an all-white, all-male Mississippi jury.<sup>15</sup> White supremacy had clearly "won" this opening post-*Brown* round in Mississippi, so decisively in fact that many activists would not so much as enter the "Magnolia Jungle."<sup>16</sup>

### *"God Made it So Plain"*

The civil rights movement eventually found Fannie Lou Hamer in August of 1962. It took almost as long for the movement to find Mississippi. While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its intrepid field secretary, Medgar Evers, had a presence in the state, that presence often reflected a legal and middle-class bias for which the organization was increasingly known.<sup>17</sup> So as the 1960s got underway, poor black Mississippians were not well represented in the burgeoning movement. This changed, and rather dramatically, with the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960.<sup>18</sup> Catalyzed by the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, college students flocked to direct-action protests across the South and the Midwest. Seeking to organize the passionate response she had witnessed, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) Ella Baker gathered student leaders at Shaw University in Raleigh.<sup>19</sup> Out of the conference SNCC was formed as an independent civil rights organization. Its mission was to empower local blacks to organize for themselves rather than to wait for national leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins to deliver change.

In the process of cultivating leaders, however, SNCC almost imploded before it even started because of competing views of the group's mission. Some called for more direct-action campaigns while others urged a less confrontational approach most typified by voter registration campaigns. Baker helped resolve the dispute by designating that one group would organize direct-action protests while the other would conduct voter registration work. However, SNCC learned rather quickly that voter registration work in Mississippi was actually a mode of direct action—action that held out deadly consequences.

Mississippi was often known as the last frontier of the civil rights movement. The racism was so virulent, so total, and so institutionalized that the movement had largely avoided the state.<sup>20</sup> This changed in August of 1961 when SNCC's Robert Parris Moses set up shop in McComb, Mississippi, a town in the southwestern corner of the state, which had a relatively active NAACP presence.<sup>21</sup> The Hamilton College and Harvard-educated Moses quickly recruited young organizers for this first voter education and registration campaign. Yet, such actions

were met with swift consequences. On September 25, Herbert Lee, a father of ten who had shepherded Moses around the community, was shot and killed at point blank range by Mississippi State Representative, E. H. Hurst. By December, the fledgling movement had effectively been run out of town.

While many saw the McComb campaign as a failure, Moses and his charges viewed things differently. In short order, they had organized a movement of highly committed locals, many of whom had taken the audacious trip to the county courthouse and tried to register to vote. Some had even passed the voter test, which was notoriously difficult. State law gave registrars enormous discretion in determining who could take the test and how they would be tested. Would-be registrants could be asked to read *and* interpret to the registrar's satisfaction any one of the state constitution's more than 200 provisions. Far more importantly, terror hovered over the county courthouse: economic reprisals and physical intimidation came swiftly to those brave enough to make the attempt. Not surprisingly, many Mississippi counties with overwhelmingly black populations did not have a single black voter on the rolls.<sup>22</sup> The price of the franchise was simply too high and its preparations too demanding.

Moses and his young charges did not flee the state, however. Instead they retreated to a beachhead in the Mississippi Delta where the planters, eager to protect their economic interests, practiced a paternal brand of racism that was more conducive to SNCC's mobilization strategies. The numbers also appeared to be on the organization's side. In many Delta counties, blacks outnumbered whites nearly two to one. If a voter registration movement could take hold there, blacks would hold the electoral power. Long disenfranchised blacks soon could be electing sheriffs, school boards, and mayors—a threatening reality that led local whites to derisively deem the movement the Second Reconstruction.<sup>23</sup>

It was in this context that SNCC came to the small agricultural community of Ruleville in August of 1962. Fannie Lou Hamer's longtime friend, Mary Tucker, informed the middle-aged mother that a civil rights meeting would be held on Monday evening of August 27 at the local Williams Chapel Church. Though initially skeptical, Hamer attended. Mass meetings were an integral part of the black freedom movement's grassroots contingent. Through freedom songs, event-driven testimony, sermons, and secular speeches, these meetings cultivated the ground out of which the larger movement for social change grew. The meetings, which were often held in local churches, resembled a religious service, as the content of the songs, sermons, and speeches tapped into biblical lessons familiar to the meeting's attendees. This particular meeting changed the course of Fannie Lou Hamer's life. The meeting was led by SCLC's James Bevel and SNCC's James Forman, who in 1962 had come together in Mississippi under the umbrella of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Meeting attendees learned of their constitutional rights as citizens and of what its leaders referred to as God's plan for their civic redemption. By all accounts, Hamer was transfixed; this is what she had been awaiting for most of her adult life. She eagerly volunteered to go to the Sunflower County Courthouse in Indianola on Friday, August 31, to register to vote. For the remainder of her life, what took place at the courthouse that day would serve, for many years to come, as a central subject of Hamer's speeches. She learned very quickly that designs on citizenship for black Mississippians met with swift and brutal retribution.

While Hamer frequently recounted her baptism into the movement before audiences across the country, that day was also transformative for Bob Moses. He, along with several other SNCC organizers, accompanied Hamer and seventeen of her fellow volunteers to the Sunflower County Courthouse on August 31. When events with local law enforcement threatened to spiral out of control, he heard the soothing yet defiant voice of Hamer as she broke into song on their rented bus and soothed badly jangled nerves. Less than three months later, and not having forgotten the heavy-set, fearless woman with the commanding voice and presence, Moses instructed Charles McLaurin to find her. He wanted Hamer to share her story at a SNCC conference in Nashville. McLaurin eventually found Hamer in a small shack in the Tallahatchie County community of Cascilla, where she had retreated that fall to get out of harm's way.<sup>24</sup> Together they headed north to Tennessee. She did not know it at the time, but Hamer had just started her work as a full-time organizer for SNCC.

That winter she and her family moved off the Marlow plantation to 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville. She decided to confront her would-be assassins face-to-face. If she was killed during the course of her civil rights work, she would fall "five-feet-four-inches forward for freedom," as she liked to tell audiences.<sup>25</sup> And in June of 1963, she was nearly killed in a small jail in Winona, Mississippi. At an illegally segregated bus terminal and café, she and five of her travel companions were arrested returning home from a voter registration workshop in Charleston, South Carolina. Taken to the Montgomery County Jail, Hamer was brutally beaten with heavy blackjacks by two black prisoners at the instruction of white law enforcement officials. The beating was so severe that she never fully recovered. In fact, she would not allow her family to visit her for nearly two-months because she did not want her husband and daughters to see her discolored and disfigured body. As Hamer did with her voter registration experience, she quickly translated the torture chamber of the Winona jail into a potent rhetorical resource. Telling her Winona story to audiences until she died in 1977, Hamer transformed traumatic and private humiliation into a badge of civil rights honor. Describing the sexualized sadism in no small detail also functioned as therapy after the traumatic encounter to which her body bore mute witness.

Overall, SNCC's and COFO's drive to register black voters was largely unsuccessful. White registrars held vast and largely unaccountable power. The federal government did not yet have the legal authority to intervene in meaningful ways. Blacks feared economic and physical reprisals. And, organizing Delta communities was a slow and frustrating process. But in October of 1963, Moses and Allard Lowenstein hit on an idea of holding a "mock" election parallel to the state's legal one in which Mississippi blacks could vote without fear. Black pharmacist and Clarksburg activist Aaron Henry was drafted to run as Governor, while white Vicksburg native, Reverend Edwin King, agreed to run as Lt. Governor. Lowenstein quickly recruited Stanford and Yale undergraduates to help organize what would become the Freedom Vote. In three weeks, nearly 80,000 black Mississippians cast Freedom Ballots, proving to the nation that indeed, if given the opportunity, blacks would vote.<sup>26</sup> The experiment in integrated democracy proved decisive to COFO's leadership, and plans quickly formed around the idea of bringing hundreds—perhaps thousands—of white student volunteers into Mississippi to organize the following summer. But rather than conduct another mock election, Moses argued for a legally valid political party, one in which blacks could take the lead organizationally and

one that would challenge the state of Mississippi's whites-only Democratic Party. Fannie Lou Hamer would play a pivotal role in what would become the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

The MFDP was formed in late April, 1964, and its plans were audacious. They intended to hold legally binding precinct, county, and district meetings, culminating in a state convention in Jackson in August. National delegates would then be selected to attend the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City where the all-white "regular" Democratic delegation would be challenged. The MFDP's ultimate aim was to be legally recognized by convention delegates as the legitimate Democratic Party of Mississippi. Hamer was chosen as one of the sixty-eight delegates representing the MFDP in Atlantic City. She was also selected as vice-chair of that delegation. On August 22, and carried live on national television, the MFDP was given a hearing before the Credentials Committee; it needed ten votes from the committee to proceed further. Several notables testified, including Henry, King, and Rita Schwerner, whose husband Mickey Schwerner had been murdered in Neshoba County on June 21. MFDP's lead attorney, Joseph Rauh, also wanted the Credentials Committee to hear from someone at the grassroots level. As a very skilled and successful lawyer, Rauh knew he had a persuasive powerhouse in Fannie Lou Hamer.

For eight minutes, Hamer's fulgurous testimony captivated the nation. She spoke about Indianola. She spoke about Winona. In her unlettered but impassioned vernacular, she thundered: "if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sit with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily?"<sup>27</sup> Such was her rhetorical power that a panicked President Lyndon Baines Johnson called a hasty press conference in mid-speech to take the cameras off the former sharecropper. But the networks caught on and replayed Hamer's entire speech during their primetime broadcasts. Rauh and the MFDP would eventually lose the high-stakes game of party legitimacy—at least in 1964. Johnson simply had too much political capital and bureaucratic muscle to be outflanked by the novices from Mississippi. As a compromise, Johnson and the party offered two at-large seats to the 68-member delegation. In response, Hamer replied famously, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats."<sup>28</sup>

The MFDP returned to Mississippi defeated and frustrated: they had played by all the rules and still lost. Hamer's question was most apt: was this America? Or perhaps, just what kind of America was this, where blacks were fired and beaten for simply trying to become citizens? Some in the MFDP quit. But not Fannie Lou Hamer. Emboldened by what she had seen and heard in Atlantic City, and more determined than ever to take her message to any willing ear, Hamer returned home as something of a hero to many black Mississippians. In short order she had become the face of the movement in the state. As she would note before her Indianola audience, many likely did want to "see what [she] look[ed] like" (41). But Hamer was not in the movement for fame or for money. Indeed, her fellow activists declared that she could have garnered a handsome income traveling with the NAACP performing freedom songs and testifying about her experiences with Mississippi segregation.<sup>29</sup> And certainly no one would have blamed the perennially impoverished Hamer for doing as much. Instead, she



returned to her home in Sunflower County. Here was ground zero of the fight, and she was determined to be in the middle of it, even if it meant sacrificing her life.

*"We'll Go Up This Freedom Road Together"*

After her nationally televised DNC testimony, Hamer received "invitations to speak everywhere." In fact, McLaurin was utterly overwhelmed in his attempts to meet all of the speaking requests that came pouring into the Hamer home.<sup>30</sup> Soon after she returned from Atlantic City, she was finally able to speak before a mass meeting in Indianola, Mississippi because so many Delta blacks wanted to see the brave, hometown woman who received a national platform to speak on their behalf. Although speaking in a small Baptist school twenty-six miles outside of Ruleville might not seem like a telling measure of Hamer's growing popularity, the fact that she and McClaurin had been trying—without success—to secure a speaking venue in Indianola for the past two years, demonstrates that Hamer's national notoriety exerted influence over local politics.

Sustained analysis of Hamer's speech at the mass meeting in Indianola illustrates the ways in which she used discourse to undermine white supremacist terror and to instill a sense of moral obligation to take action in the audience members. Those who actually witnessed Hamer speaking at these mass meetings agreed that her "sermonettes" were particularly powerful "because she could explain fairly complex phenomena in very straightforward terms that the people she represented, the people that she emerged from, could understand."<sup>31</sup> Hamer's rhetorical purpose thus was to encourage black Mississippians to register and vote, which represented a significant risk for community members, as her own experiences with voter registration and civic assertion exemplified most vividly. Convincing her audience to undertake such a risky endeavor, therefore, required a complex rhetorical strategy. Throughout the speech, Hamer presented herself as a fellow community member, a prophet sent to "proclaim and bring relief to the captives," and a preacher committed to guiding her parishioners along the path to empowerment (14). These personae were fashioned through the recitation of two key narratives that involved her first registration attempt and her brutal beating in Winona. The narratives established Hamer's unique position as a member of the community, yet one with significant experiences outside of that community—experiences which imbued her with the perspective necessary to lead her audience of Delta blacks. What is more, the narratives also served to weaken the stranglehold white supremacy exerted over Mississippi politics. In combination, Hamer's narratives and her personae evidenced the oppression that she and her fellow audience members experienced to establish Mississippi blacks as God's "chosen people." In the process, Hamer assured her audience that God was on the side of—and would ultimately relieve—the oppressed. As Hamer used this scriptural assurance to strip white supremacy of its intimidating force, her speech at a small Baptist school in Indianola attached itself to centuries of liberation struggles across the globe. Hamer thus crafted an address that was inspiring in its historical context and continues to offer inspiration for audiences still today. The speech remains an ingenious example of civil rights discourse that exemplifies the important role of the local grassroots contingency to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

To establish her interrelated personae of a fellow community member, a prophet, and a preacher, Hamer relied upon two key narratives. Over the span of nearly fifteen years, Hamer would tell these two stories to thousands of listeners across the country. Depending on the audience and the occasion, she would feature either the highly truncated version, or the extended account. Before her hometown interlocutors, Hamer offered the most extended report of both narratives that survived. She led into the body of this address in much the same way as her Credentials Committee testimony a month earlier, declaring: "My name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi" (2). This simple declarative statement, upon closer inspection, is not so simple, necessitating a closer examination. Hamer's use of the title "Mrs." in her own self-presentation defied the southern custom of reserving that title for married white women and thereby revealed both her transgressive nature and her high degree of self-respect. Note also Hamer's conspicuous pronouncement of where she lives. At first blush, this appeared to be the statement of a child, the sort of rote introduction made on the first day of school. But Hamer is no child, and her announcement of address functioned to firmly establish her persona by placing her rather permanently in a community. Even today, black Mississippians often talk about home as where they "stay," not where they "live." The rhetorical difference is stark, and Hamer was painfully aware of its implication. Until December 1962, her life had revolved around plantation shacks where indeed she could only "stay." Many simply did not even have a home address. But with her family's move into the town of Ruleville, her address constituted a presence not dictated by a white plantation owner or manager—this was her place and she was proud of it. Hamer's announcement also modeled bravery for her Sunflower County listeners. That is, many Mississippi blacks feared giving out an address since threats, violence, and intimidation could result. Viewed in this manner, Hamer's emphasis on place, like her deliberate use of the courtesy title "Mrs.," represented a proud and courageous statement of identity.

After establishing herself as a fellow black Mississippian, a proud woman, and a resident of Sunflower County, Hamer issued the first of two narratives. She opened with the following statement: "It was in 1962, the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, that eighteen of us traveled twenty-six miles to this place, to the county courthouse, to try to register to become first class citizens" (2). Notice the conspicuous display of discrete facts. Hamer had been trained by SNCC to document and record all relevant facts when it came to her civil rights work. Those facts often became the legal substance of the organization's frequent affidavits to the federal government and the fundraising allies in the North. For Fannie Lou Hamer, such details of her treacherous work as an activist could also function as inspiration to her listeners, since most had scrupulously avoided the registrar's office in the county courthouse. Hamer's narrative then pivoted on what happened following her failed attempt to register. First, the bus driver was arrested for driving a bus painted the wrong color—highlighting both the absurdity and viciousness of white law enforcement officials. Second, when she returned to her family's shack on the Marlow plantation, she learned of the consequences of her civic activism. Vividly recounting the scene awaiting her, Hamer stated: "When I got there I was already fired. My children met me and told me, said, 'Momma,' said, 'this man is hot!' Said, 'He said you will have to go back and withdraw, or you will have to leave'" (4). Hamer likely knew that her firing was a foregone conclusion. Plantation owners kept a very close eye on the activities of those who

sharecropped their plantations, and local White Citizens' Councils, in turn, carefully policed plantation owners. That the owner in question—W.D. Marlow—beat her back to the plantation speaks volumes about the stakes of Hamer's civic assertion.

But Hamer carefully documented in the next breath her rhetorical transgression: "this white man [Marlow] walked over and said, 'Pap [Perry Hamer, her husband], did you tell Fannie Lou what I said?' He said, 'Yes, sir,' and I walked out. And he said, 'Fannie Lou, did Pap tell you what I said?' And I said, 'He did.' He said, 'Well, Fannie Lou,' said, 'you will have to go down and withdraw or you will have to leave'" (4-7). Hamer then modeled the type of strength in the face of oppression that she urged of her audience: "And I addressed and told him, as we have always had to say, 'Mister,' I say, 'I didn't register for you,' I say, 'I was trying to register for myself'" (8). Hamer had skillfully narrated this volatile scene, down to the exact details of the conversation. That recreated dialogue functioned rhetorically not only to dramatize but also to subvert: Fannie Lou Hamer recounted the voice of the white authority and calmly but defiantly resisted it. Through the re-enactment of the confrontation, she assumed the last word. As the audio recording indicates, Hamer's listeners gasped and cheered, evidencing its dramatic impact on them as a member of their community spoke truth to power. Hamer then moved to contextualize her rhetorical confrontation.

Before Northern and more secular audiences, Hamer's narrative of her civil rights awakening was seldom contextualized in biblical terms. But before her neighbors in Sunflower County, Hamer transitioned from outspoken community member to prophetic exegetist declaring, "God made it so plain. He sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And he made it so plain here in Mississippi the man that heads the project is named Moses. Bob Moses." Hamer reasoned, "And he sent Bob Moses down in Mississippi to tell all of these hate groups to let his people go" (12). She deftly documented the parallels between God's chosen people and black Mississippians; in so doing she elevated their collective suffering to a righteous cause in which only the willfully blind would not see God's guiding hand. Through such passages, Hamer functioned as the rhetorically attuned prophet, pointing out to her listeners the signs that God was sending to black Mississippians.

Hamer's prophetic persona is cemented through the vital and ordained role she occupied in this second, sacred narrative. This was the story that shocked the nation just a few weeks prior; it was the story that President Lyndon Johnson tried to keep the nation from hearing. Up until the day she died, Hamer's Winona story was a central part of her speechmaking. She divided the drama into three parts, which included: events at the bus terminal (Staley's Café), the beating of her travel companions in the Montgomery County Jail, and finally, the sadistic and granular details of her own vicious beating.

Hamer narrated the arrests at the Winona bus terminal with her usual attention to factual detail. She also recounted her dialogue with Annell Ponder, who worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and who was the ostensible leader of their impromptu delegation. Their removal from the café was an illegal act by dint of the 1961 Interstate Commerce Committee (ICC) ruling. Indeed, as Sovereignty Commission documents illustrated, local white officials in Montgomery County had been strategically flaunting the ICC's ruling. Notice that Hamer refused to name the local law enforcement officials. Instead she referred to them as the "chief of police" and the "state highway patrolman," which she did for

the entirety of the narrative. These titles functioned rhetorically to contextualize Mississippi racism and brutality as a set of institutional practices, rather than the idiosyncratic (and thus isolated) racism of random white police officers. Hamer's Indianola listeners likely understood that names and people were largely beside the point—police brutality was simply a way of life. Hamer closed this section of the story by foregrounding the awful beating she would soon receive: "When he opened the door, and as I started to get in, he kicked me and I was carried to the county jail" (23). Her arrest and kick appeared even more egregious given that they had been completely unmotivated by any "civil rights" action on her part.

Hamer next took her listeners inside the Montgomery County Jail. The importance of what she narrated is underscored by the whisper in her voice; this contrasts rather violently with the profane shouts of the nameless law enforcement officials. Her carefully modulated dialectic of quiet/loud subtly serves to announce sides in this unfolding sacred/profane drama. Hamer recreated what she heard in her jail cell as Annell Ponder is viciously and loudly interrogated. Specifically, Hamer notes Ponder's prayer: "And I would hear when she would hit the floor again. And during the time they was beating Miss Ponder, I heard her when she began to pray. And she asked God to have mercy on those people because they didn't know what they was doing" (26). Most members of Hamer's audience understood her direct appropriation from the New Testament Gospel of Luke and the account of Christ's act of forgiveness while being crucified: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."<sup>32</sup> Hamer bore witness to both Annell Ponder's defiance—she would not say "yes, sir"—as well as her Christ-like invocation of forgiveness. That the offending police officers also likely knew the scripture in question perhaps further stoked their sadism.

Ponder's redemptive suffering, though, does not complete the narrative. Hamer next positioned herself as the principal subject of the story, recalling a question she was forced to answer: "The state highway patrolman said, 'Where you from?' I said, 'Ruleville, Mississippi.' He said, 'I'm going to check that out'" (29). Reading or listening to the speech decades later, it is easy to miss the defiance in Hamer's answer. She knew, given what had just happened to Annell Ponder, that her civil rights activism endangered her life. And yet by proudly announcing her hometown—in much the same way she had in the opening of the address—Hamer did not flee from her recent past. She understood that a phone call from Winona law enforcement officials would be made to the Ruleville Police Department, wherein the former would learn of Hamer's extensive civil rights work. By sheer accident the organizing voice of civil rights in Sunflower County landed a few short miles away in the Montgomery County Jail. No doubt Hamer's recent activism further stoked the Winona sadists. Hamer recounted the threatening response: "You are from Ruleville, all right. . . . We is going to make you wish you was dead" (30). With this motivational detail revealed, Hamer led her audience through the brutality she endured. She remained largely in control of her narrative even as she prepared to recall the violation of her body in a small prison cell surrounded by five men. We use the qualifier "largely" because even a masterful chronicler's memory might surrender to severe bodily trauma: "And he beat me I don't know how long. And after a while, he was exhausted and I was too" (32). Hamer's temporal recall faltered under the unbearable pain of the beating. The body trumped the mind, but only temporarily.

She quickly recovered to detail a second brutal beating, which resulted in further

humiliation and violation as her dress was lifted up. Her attempts at modesty during a most immodest act enraged a white police officer. Hamer's decorous gesture subtly repudiated the sexual sadism, only stoking more violence. Again, her pain was most visible: "I don't know how long this lasted, but after a while I must have passed out." She awoke to hear, "'Get up from there, fatso'" (35). Hamer's story fittingly culminated with the sacred: "But I couldn't get up. I don't know how long, but I kept trying, and you know God is always able. And after a while I did get up, and I went back to my cell" (35). Rather than feeling abandoned by God, Hamer considered the fact that she survived such a brutal beating as evidence of both the righteousness of the civil rights cause and of her preordained role to promote it. Just as God had "done for Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego" in King Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, "God has done the same thing for Fannie Lou Hamer, Annell Ponder, and Lawrence Guyot" (20).<sup>33</sup> Unlike Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, who escaped unscathed, Ponder, Guyot, and Hamer sustained injuries that would plague them for the remainder of their lives. This disruption in the scriptural parallel suggested that the Winona narrative served multiple rhetorical purposes for Hamer. Specifically, the testimony of her experience outside the community demonstrated her prophetic ethos as a chosen person delivered by God and imbued with first-hand perspective regarding the struggle. It simultaneously dramatized the grave injustices all black Mississippians, in their collective position as chosen persons, had to endure.

Hamer made the subtle transition from a prophet who revealed to a preacher who instructed by prodding her audience with a familiar question, "is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave?" Adding to her trademark refrain, she distinguished this particular audience of God's chosen people with greater detail: ". . . where people are being murdered, lynched, and killed, because we want to register and vote" (9)? Hamer returned to this central question later in the speech, this time yielding an answer: "I want to say tonight, we can no longer ignore the fact, America is *not* the land of the free and the home of the brave when just because people want to register and vote and be treated like human beings, Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman is dead today" (35). Invoking the names of the three Freedom Summer volunteers who went missing in June and were found dead in early August—less than two hundred miles away from where she spoke—Hamer added local and more recent events to her personal Winona narrative, demonstrating the widespread dire consequences that accompanied civil rights activity in Mississippi.

More than simply illustrating that the nation had failed to live up to its principles by denying citizenship rights to its black inhabitants, Hamer encouraged her audience to recognize the consequences of this failure, and to embrace their role in preventing the country's collapse. Merging the apocalyptic and the secular, Hamer contended: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. America is divided against itself and without their considering us human beings, one day America will crumble" (35).<sup>34</sup> America will be destroyed, reasoned Hamer, not by African American retaliation, but by Divine intervention "because God is not pleased. God is not pleased at all the murdering, and all the brutality, and all the killing for no reason at all." She continued, speaking more quickly and building to a climax: "God is not pleased at the Negro children in the state of Mississippi suffering from malnutrition. God is not pleased because we have to go raggedy each day. God is not pleased because we have to go to the field and work

from ten to eleven hours for three lousy dollars," she concluded (35). As the recording indicated, Hamer's audience immediately responded to the repetition of the opening phrase "God is not pleased"—and perhaps to their characterization as God's chosen people—with resounding applause.<sup>35</sup>

This climactic passage not only stirred her audience's emotions, it also relayed the core logic of Hamer's rhetorical strategy. Such logic presumed that God was on the side of the oppressed and, as both of Hamer's narratives attested, Mississippi blacks were most certainly among the oppressed. Yet, Hamer went further than merely documenting the problem by also clarifying the important role that Mississippi blacks would play in the solution—action steps that were sanctioned, and perhaps even demanded, by God. The oppressed thus were also those chosen people upon whose weary shoulders the nation's survival depended. This salvific imperative rhetorically reversed the position of Hamer's auditors from powerless and abused victims of segregation to preordained moral agents capable of rescuing the nation from implosion. Hamer supported this rhetorical reversal by establishing her audience as among the most oppressed class in the United States. By invoking God's wrath and emphasizing white segregationists' fallibility, she also helped strip the Delta blacks' oppressors of their power to intimidate.

To further undermine a legacy of white supremacist terror, Hamer appealed to the natural sensibilities of those who earned their livelihood by tilling the land. She contended: "The 37<sup>th</sup> Psalms says 'Fret not thouselves because of evildoers, neither be thy envious against the workers of iniquity for they shall be cut down like the green grass and wither away as the green herb.'" Hamer continued by both instructing and fostering identification: "Delight thouselves in the Lord and verily thou shalt be filled.' And we are determined to be filled in Mississippi today" (14). Through this biblical passage, Hamer carried forth the lessons she gleaned from the songs her mother sang to her as a child. Expressing faith in Divine justice, Hamer contended that the oppressive actions of whites would not go unpunished, even as she reassured her black audience that God was on the side of the oppressed.

Bolstering the latter part of this contention with further biblical evidence, Hamer provided scripture from the book of Matthew: "'Blessed are those that moan, for they shall be comforted.' And we have moaned a long time in Mississippi." In her dual role as both preacher and fellow community member, Hamer used such scripture to connect the biblical moral to her audience's experiences—a connection she furthered with the following: "He said 'the meek shall inherit the earth.' And there's no race in America that's meeker than the Negro" (39). Hamer assured the black Deltans seated before her that the experience of slavery and continued forms of subjugation should serve as motivators to act rather than circumstances that exacerbated their feelings of disempowerment. "We don't have anything to be ashamed of. All we have to do is trust God and launch out into the deep. You can pray until you faint," Hamer charged, "but if you don't get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it into your lap" (39).

Hamer continually guarded against the complacency that promises of Divine intervention risked promoting. Carefully balancing claims that reassured her audience that God was on the side of the oppressed and that He would bring relief to the captive, Hamer also admonished them to act on their own behalf. Calling the faith of her fellow sharecroppers into

question, Hamer stood apart from the congregation—challenging them: "Now you can't tell me you trust God and come out to church every Sunday with a bunch of stupid hats on seeing what the other one have on and paving the preacher's way to hell and yours too" (20). Although the comment was critical of her immediate audience, it once again elicited their roaring applause. As did a similar claim Hamer made in the middle of her address, when she contended boldly: "You have a responsibility . . . to walk in Christ's footsteps and keep his commandment . . . to launch into the deep and go to the courthouse, *not* [to] come here tonight to see what I look like, but to do something about the system here" (41). In these passages, Hamer transitioned from a fellow community member to the position of preacher and prophet—confronting those churchgoing people who sought to keep up with appearances, but not with the scripture's teachings. As Hamer expressed it, the songs sung and the scripture read at mass meetings should be purposeful and provocative, not just palliative and oriented toward maintaining the appearance of righteousness. "'We Shall Overcome' means something to me tonight," she implored her audience. "Because he said 'seek and ye shall find, knock and the door would be opened, ask and it shall be given.' It was a long time, but now we see. We can see, we can discern the new day" (42). Hamer moved along with her audience from the past of dissatisfaction and inaction to a pivotal moment of recognition that prompted action in line with the scripture's challenges. In this moment, Hamer used humor to collapse the distinction between her preacher persona and her ethos as a member of the community, telling her audience there is "one thing I don't want to hear you say tonight after I finish . . . I don't want to hear you say 'Honey, I am behind you.' Well, move, I don't want you back there . . . I want you to say 'I'm with you' and we'll go up this freedom road together!" (49).

Hamer skillfully reversed the relationship of fear between white and black Americans in such a manner that her audience recognized both its rights and its moral obligation to enact them. By turning her audience's attention to signs of *white* Americans' fear of black people, Hamer also offered an explanation for oppression that actually empowered her audience. She accomplished this shift by proclaiming: "We don't have anything to be ashamed of here in Mississippi . . . we don't carry guns because we don't have anything to hide. When you see people packing guns and is afraid for people to talk to you, he is afraid something is going to be brought out into the open on him" (37). After alluding to white shame and its accompanying trepidation, she combined the technique of *apostrophe*—addressing an audience distinct from the primary group to which one is speaking—with her prophetic ethos in a manner that emboldened her present black congregation. Hamer addressed her absent white segregationist auditors declaring: "I want the [white] people to know in Mississippi today, the cover has been pulled back off of you. And you don't have any place to hide" (37). Suggesting that white Mississippians' violent and paranoid tendencies were the result of fear and shame, Hamer undermined their power to intimidate black Deltans. In so doing, she also cleared the ground for her advocacy of increased black activism by allaying the fears of her audience.

Hamer echoed the reversal of fear throughout her address, asking her audience at one point: "Do you think anybody would stand out in the dark to shoot me and to shoot other people, would you call that a brave person?" (18). Without hesitation, her audience shouted: "No!" Using the example of night-riding white supremacists as a thermometer for the nation's health, Hamer altered her house divided refrain: "It's a shame before God that people will let

hate not only destroy us, but it will destroy them. Because a house divided against itself cannot stand and today America is divided against itself because they don't want us to have even the ballot here in Mississippi" (18). According to Hamer, white Mississippians were afraid of black suffrage for the same reason they worried about the visibility of their actions. "If we'd been treated right all these years," she reasoned, "they wouldn't be afraid for us to get the ballot" (18). Hamer explained that blacks had been systematically deprived of their constitutional privileges because of white panic over black retaliation. This interpretation of the political situation in Mississippi specifically targeted allegations of African American apathy, a point Hamer made lucid when arguing, "people had said for years and years 'the Negroes can't do anything.' That's the report they was sending out about the people of Mississippi." She asked her audience, "'The Negroes are ignorant,' But just who is acting stupid now?" (45). By interpreting white violence as a sign of shame, fear, and stupidity, Hamer attempted to weaken the terrorist power that white segregationists held over the lives of black Mississippians. What's more, Hamer further challenged her black audience to enact their civil rights in such a manner that would disprove the derogatory stereotypes about them and demonstrate the collective power held by African Americans in the South.

Exposing white supremacists as shameful, fearful, and ignorant, Hamer encouraged blacks to exhibit a charitable attitude toward their pitiful white brethren. From the pulpit, Hamer instructed her fellow community members: "[W]e are not fighting against these people because we hate them." Quite conversely, "We are fighting these people because we love them and we're the only thing can save them now. We are fighting to save these people from their hate and from all the things that would be so bad against them. We want them to see the right way" (42). African Americans' struggle against white supremacy, as this final plea made manifest, was a struggle not only *for* recognition—for blacks to be recognized as citizens worthy of, and entitled to, rights and protection. The struggle also is one aimed at prompting segregationists *to* recognize the way their oppression of blacks affected white Americans. In order to fulfill God's promise to his chosen people and to prompt such recognition within the minds of whites, therefore, Hamer encouraged her black audience to love the enemy. In her role as leader of the congregation, Hamer embodied such a charitable attitude herself, proclaiming: "Every night of my life that I lay down before I go to sleep, I pray for these people that despitefully use me" (42). In this culminating prayer, Hamer advocated a selfless, morally superior type of love, one that was rooted in the promise of the gospels and in the inescapable interconnection between the races.

*"Making Democracy a Reality"*<sup>36</sup>

Combining the multiple personae of a fellow community member, a prophet, and a preacher with testimony of her own civic awakening and brutal beating, Hamer moved her audience of Delta blacks beyond their fear of political assertion and toward actions that would help themselves, their communities, and their white brethren. From abolitionism onward, advocates of social change in the United States have featured the messianic characterization of American blacks to establish a moral imperative for their activism.<sup>37</sup> Hamer was, thus, echoing a tradition of voices urging greater democratic representation when she imbued Delta blacks'



participation in the civil rights movement with scriptural significance. Convincing this particular audience that God was on the side of the oppressed, that their oppressors were not to be feared or envied, and that their civic action was needed to save a "crumbling nation," Hamer at once undermined the stranglehold white supremacy exerted upon black civic engagement and concomitantly altered her oppressed audience's self-conceptions. The complex rhetorical strategy Hamer garnered to meet the multifaceted rhetorical situation she faced demonstrates the way in which speeches like "We're On Our Way" contributed to the grassroots contingent of the black freedom movement.

Grassroots activism during the black freedom movement, consequently, made significant contributions to our nation's democratic system. To say that advances in black voter registration in Mississippi were hard won is a gross understatement. But the herculean efforts of activists like Hamer, and those COFO activists who empowered her produced important results. By 1972, the Magnolia State boasted a 60 percent registration rate among blacks of voting age—up from single-digit figures in the early 1960s. This overwhelming increase in registration undoubtedly led to an increase in black elected officials; by 1972, Mississippi had 145 black elected officials, and by 1976 the state led the South with 215 at all levels of government. Perhaps ironically, Hamer was not one of these elected officials. Although she ran for national office several times, she never experienced electoral victory. That said, Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, and Annie Devine changed the nation's electoral landscape forever when they ran for Congress in 1964, leading to what became known as the Congressional Challenge of 1965. That challenge played a crucial role in eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965—a bill that finally gave southern blacks the federal protections they needed to register in large numbers.

What is more, the leadership abilities that the COFO activists helped cultivate in local people like Hamer, inspired far-reaching and long-lasting effects. Once Hamer became involved with civil rights activism, there was literally no stopping her. She shared the podium with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and she also addressed the 1968 and 1972 Democratic National Conventions. She was a featured speaker at the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus, and she inspired a large crowd of anti-war protesters in Berkeley during a nation-wide Vietnam War moratorium rally. Hamer regularly spoke on college campuses across the country, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Harvard University, Duke University, Florida State University, and Seattle University. Hamer traveled from the South to the North—and even to the West Coast of Africa—speaking on behalf of human rights, economic justice, and interracial cooperation.

No matter how far she traveled, however, she remained committed to her local community's needs. In 1969, Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, which she helped support through the honoraria she received from national speaking engagements. At its most productive level, Hamer's co-op planted vegetables and cash crops across a 640-acre stretch of land. It also bred livestock through an expansive pig bank program, and it helped hundreds of impoverished Deltans secure loans for their first homes. During her fifteen years of activism (1962-1977), Hamer thus helped hundreds of Mississippi residents acquire decent housing, she encouraged thousands of blacks to register and vote, and she secured millions of dollars worth of food, clothing, machinery, and monetary donations from

northern supporters of poverty programs in the South. Fittingly, Hamer is buried on the grounds of the first forty acres of land she purchased for the now defunct Freedom Farm cooperative. Hamer's friends, family members, and fellow activists have dedicated the land to a memorial site for Hamer and are presently seeking funds to erect a statue in her honor.<sup>38</sup> They hope that such a monument will contribute to the public's memory of Fannie Lou Hamer; this is our hope too. We are motivated to recover and analyze Hamer's discourse in an effort to promote Americans' awareness of her life and symbolic legacy. Though "We're On Our Way" is but one speech within a much larger rhetorical career, we believe that it suggests the pivotal role she played within a multifaceted movement, intimating more broadly that Fannie Lou Hamer's powerful and fearless voice contributed greatly to our nation's democracy.

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*Notes*

1 Curiously enough, Indianola, Mississippi is the setting for two touchstone anthropological studies on race and the South, both published within two years of each other. See John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937); and Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom* (New York: Viking, 1939).

2 Alan Ribback later changed his name to Moses Moon. His remarkable collection of audio from the movement is available at the Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

3 In addition to Ribback, Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, Jean and Charlie Sweet, as well as Jeff and Sarah Goldstein recorded Hamer's speeches to local audiences in both the North and the South. What is more, they kept these recordings safely stowed for over thirty years and happily shared them with us.

4 Given the significance of Hamer's Indianola speech—the apparent enthusiasm this speech yielded, and in light of the fact that it represents one of the lengthiest extant recordings in Hamer's *corpus*—it is somewhat surprising that the speech has been routinely mis-cited from even those scholars who do pay careful attention to her discourse. Janice D. Hamlet includes at least two lengthy excerpts from a speech she cites as: Hamer, F.L. (1963b) "Speech delivered at mass meeting in Hattisburg [*sic*]" belonging to the Smithsonian archives' Moses Moon Collection. Yet, according to the chief archivist of the Moses Moon Collection, no such speech exists based on the correspondence between Maegan Parker Brooks and Wendy Shay, June 4, 2008. Interestingly, the excerpts from the speech match our transcription of another recording within the collection—the mass meeting speech Hamer delivered in Indianola in 1964. See excerpts on pp. 567-568, as well as 569-570 in Janice D. Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 560-576. Furthermore, Bernice Johnson Reagon's book chapter explores what seems to be the Indianola speech. That chapter came out before Hamlet's article. Hamlet cites Reagon's chapter heavily, so the citation confusion can be traced to Reagon. However, it is thanks to Reagon's efforts that the Smithsonian has the singular Moses Moon Collection in the first place. She was the first person to secure and work with these recordings, so it is entirely possible that they were miscataloged to begin with and have since been revised. We are, however, confident that the recording now labeled "N 77: Indianola, Miss. Summer 1964" was actually delivered in Indianola in 1964 and not in Hattiesburg in 1963 because Hamer made reference to both the location and the year within her speech. See Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Susie Erenrich (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1999), 402. First published in Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, ed., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (New York: Carlson, 1990), 203-217.

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5 All of the remaining passages from Hamer's September 1964 speech in Indianola, Mississippi are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

6 Quotation taken from Hamer's description of Sunflower County: Fannie Lou Hamer, "America is a Sick Place and Man is on the Critical List," Speech delivered at Loop College, Chicago, Illinois, May 27, 1970 in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 104-120.

7 There is no small degree of confusion regarding Hamer's birthplace. Biographers Kay Mills and Chana Kai Lee, borrowing from several of Hamer's oral histories, claim simply that Hamer was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi; see Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 7; and, Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1. Of course Montgomery County has many hamlets and towns. But in her sworn testimony during a December 1963 federal court case, Hamer specified that she was in fact born in Tomnolen, Mississippi, an unincorporated community in Webster County. See *The United States of America v. Earle Wayne Patridge, Thomas J. Herod, Jr., William Surrell, John L. Basinger and Charles Thomas Perkins*, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi, Western Division, Criminal Action No. WCR6343, December 2-6, 1963, Oxford Mississippi, 135. The trial transcript is housed at the National Archives and Records Administration, Southeast Region, Morrow, GA.

8 Sharecropping couples were often paid up to 50 dollars to bear a healthy child, a significant sum of money in the early twentieth century. The aim, of course, was to increase the cotton yield through more able hands. The short-term financial gain for the family functioned as a long-term boon for planters.

9 For an excellent and brief discussion of that system, see Stephen Yafa, *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 173-179.

10 Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Robert Wright, August 6, 1968, Oral History Collection, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

11 Mills, *This Little Life of Mine*, 17.

12 Fannie Lou Hamer, "America is a Sick Place, and Man is on the Critical List," 106.

13 A fine—and to date, the only—book-length history of the Citizens' Councils is Neil McMillan's, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

14 One very effective means of getting blacks off of county voting rolls was to print their names, addresses, and phone numbers in the local newspaper. Mississippi law made such visibility a requirement. Of course that same visibility functioned rhetorically to render anonymity impossible.

15 Gas station owner, Lee McGarrh, witnessed Kimball's shotgun blasts that killed Melton. As if to underscore the often bizarre ironies of Mississippi and race, McGarrh actually testified as a character witness for J. W. Milam during the Till trial just months earlier. Melton

had supposedly put too much gas in Milam's truck, which Kimball was driving that fateful day. In another unexpected turn, McGarrh's son later gave the F.B.I. the only known transcript from that trial, thus ensuring that the trial's history can be written from its most important primary source. For a fascinating look at the Melton case, narrated by one of America's soon-to-be most famous journalists, and whose first job was as a scribe for a West Point, Mississippi newspaper, see David Halberstam, "Tallahatchie County Acquits a Peckerwood," *Reporter*, April 19, 1956, 26-30. Halberstam much later wrote about the Till case and his year in Mississippi; see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard, 1993), 429-441.

16 This appellation refers to the autobiography of Petal, Mississippi journalist, Percy Dale (P.D.) East, whose *Petal Paper* eventually took on the state's white supremacists and attracted something of a national readership. As a white journalist sympathetic to civil rights, East's life in Mississippi was made miserable by the Citizens' Councils and by locals boycotting his newspaper; see P. D. East, *The Magnolia Jungle: The Life, Times, and Education of a Southern Editor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960). He eventually fled the state to Mobile, Alabama. East's place in civil rights history was immortalized with publication of John Howard Griffin's bestselling book, *Black Like Me*, which remains more than 50 years after its publication in 1960, a remarkable testament to the Deep South's insidious practices of Jim Crow. During his trip Howard sought temporary refuge in Mississippi at East's residence.

17 The best treatment of Evers' work in the state remains his widow's excellent memoir. See Myrlie Evers, with William Peters, *For Us, The Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

18 For the best treatment of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, see Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

19 Ella Baker's importance to SNCC is hard to overstate. For an excellent biographical study of Baker, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). For a rhetorical treatment of Baker, see Marilyn Bordwell, "Planting Seeds of Change: Ella Baker's Radical Rhetoric," *Women's Studies in Communication* 31 (2008): 1-28.

20 For the best one-volume history of civil rights in Mississippi, see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

21 Importantly, SNCC's initial work in McComb was facilitated greatly by local activists, perhaps most notably Cleveland, Mississippi's Amzie Moore. Little scholarly work has been done on this vital behind-the-scenes organizer; see Jay Driskell, "Amzie Moore: The Biographical Roots of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi," in *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Susan M. Glisson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 129-155.

22 The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee kept careful records on black voter registration. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in 1961 no blacks were registered voters in the following Mississippi counties: Calhoun, Clarke, Chickasaw, George, Issaquena, Jefferson, Lamar, Noxubee, Pearl River, Tallahatchie, Tate, Walthall, and Wayne. Many counties had less than five registered black voters. See Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, microfilm reels 38 and 70. For an excellent historical analysis of the

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black franchise in Mississippi, see Earl M. Lewis, "The Negro Voter in Mississippi," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26 (1957): 329-50.

23 The term "Second Reconstruction" comes from C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

24 Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 42.

25 See, for example, Fannie Lou Hamer, "What Have We to Hail?" This speech was delivered in Kentucky during 1968 and is published in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 74-83.

26 To date the Freedom Vote remains a very under-studied and under-appreciated event in Mississippi's civil rights history. For the best published account, see Joseph Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963: New Strategies of Racial Protest in Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History* 55 (1989): 217-244. See also William H. Lawson, *No Small Thing: The Mississippi Freedom Vote*, dissertation (Florida State University, 2008).

27 Fannie Lou Hamer, "Testimony Before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention," Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964, in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 42-45.

28 For a fine, though truncated, history of the MFDP in Atlantic City, see Dittmer, *Local People*, 272-302.

29 See Interview by Maegan Parker Brooks with Dr. Leslie McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, June 13, 2007; and Interview by Maegan Parker Brooks with Reverend Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, June 15, 2007.

30 Interview by Maegan Parker Brooks with Dr. Leslie McLemore.

31 Interview by Maegan Parker Brooks with Dr. Leslie McLemore.

32 *The Oxford Study Bible*, ed. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1362.

33 Of the activists involved in Hamer's Winona story, several are still alive, including Ponder, Guyot, Euvester Simpson, and Rosemary Freeman Massey. June Johnson passed away in 2009. Efforts to locate James West have been unsuccessful to date. We are grateful to Lawrence Guyot for sharing with us, and with our students, the nightmare of Winona.

34 Both the book of Mark and the book of Matthew quote Jesus Christ as proclaiming this proverb that Abraham Lincoln appropriated in his speech accepting the Republican Party's nomination for Illinois State Senator. See Mark 3:25, "And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" (1308). As well as Matthew 12:25 "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste and any city or house divided against itself will not stand" (1280). *The Oxford Study Bible*, ed. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller.

35 *Anaphora*, or the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence is a rhetorical device often used to bring about a climactic point. Hamer, "Indianola Mass Meeting Speech," 1964.

36 Because Hamer defied pat categorization, consideration of her activism further troubles common divisions within more traditional historical accounts of the movement. She was both a grassroots activist and an orator who spoke from the grandstands. She was catapulted into the national limelight by leading coalitions, but she also was a rank and file organizational member, who canvassed rural communities and carved a life out of a community

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organizer's meager wage. As a movement participant, she advocated unity and decried the futility of fragmentation. Hamer was simultaneously a civil rights supporter and an advocate of the Black Power philosophy. But she was nothing if not discerning. She poked holes in the ideology of separatism, she critiqued aspects of the push for integration, and she warned feminists about the danger of building coalitions that would elide important differences. Focusing on the discourse of an activist who does not fall along conveniently drawn movement lines creates a different sketch of this pivotal period in American history.

37 Quotation taken from, Fannie Lou Hamer, "To Make Democracy a Reality," speech delivered at the Vietnam War Moratorium rally, Berkeley, California, October 15, 1969 in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 98-103.

38 For more on Hamer and the African American Jeremiad, see Maegan Parker Brooks, "Oppositional Ethos: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Vernacular Persona," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* (forthcoming 2012). For more information on the Jeremiad in general, see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990).

39 For more information on the Fannie Lou Hamer Statue Fund, see: [http://www.fannielouhamer.info/hamer\\_statue.html](http://www.fannielouhamer.info/hamer_statue.html) or visit us on Facebook at: "Fannie Lou Hamer Statue Fund."