

Emilye Crosby, "Conclusion: 'Doesn't everybody want to grow up to be Ella Baker?' Teaching Movement History" in Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement, 455-61.

This excerpt from my essay on teaching movement history ("Conclusion: 'Doesn't everybody want to grow up to be Ella Baker?' Teaching Movement History") focuses on my students' engagement with Hasan Kwame Jeffries's work on Lowndes County, Alabama, particularly related to Black Power and Freedom Politics. The excerpt begins with the paragraph at the very bottom of the page. The talk by Jeffries that I reference was at the "Local Studies, a National Movement" conference I organized at SUNY Geneseo in Spring 2006. This excerpt draws from student reflections on Jeffries's talk and on his written work (initially his dissertation and then his book, Bloody Lowndes).

on self-defense because the justice system wasn't there to protect them so they had to protect themselves." Students who have been taught to celebrate a nonviolent movement that deteriorated with the violence of Black Power can struggle to understand or accept the role self-defense actually played in the movement. After hearing my conference paper on self-defense, another student wrote, "[I]t is rather easy to confuse self-defense with violence, when in fact . . . self-defense was used by people who pledged to nonviolence, but who were not necessarily committed to it as a way of life. . . . I admit, that until you said that you object to pitting nonviolence against self-defense, I never really saw the possibility for the two to go hand-in-hand."<sup>14</sup> (See chapter 7 for my essay on the historiography of self-defense.)

It is just as crucial for students to learn two points about nonviolence: first, that it was not a given or the only tactic activists used *and* second, that it was *active*, not passive. It is also important for students to work through some of their often-unspoken assumptions and the double standards they've absorbed, ones that suggest African Americans had to remain nonviolent in order to somehow "earn" their citizenship rights. Students typically respond well to learning about nonviolence and self-defense in concrete, context-specific ways.

At the conference, what really grabbed their attention, however, were Wesley Hogan's comments that nonviolence is unnatural and counterintuitive for most people in our country and how, despite this, movement activists were sometimes able to use it to generate effective public protest and confrontation. (See chapter 6 for Hogan's essay on nonviolence.) A few students immediately connected Hogan's discussion to the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks and their own antiwar organizing. Many of the self-identified activists were struggling to figure out what nonviolence meant to them. They assumed that they were nonviolent, but didn't really know what that meant or how to *act* on it. Hogan's talk didn't offer any simple answers, but it did provide them with a clearer context and sharper framework for considering their options.<sup>15</sup> Another student went in a different direction, noting that Hogan's presentation "made me reflect on whether or not our society has the potential to be nonviolent." She continued, "I have gone back and forth trying to decide if our fight against terrorism was legitimate. . . . I am certain now that what we are doing in the Middle East isn't going to cure terrorism."<sup>16</sup>

Hasan Kwame Jeffries's talk, "Crazy Negroes and Out-of-Control Crackers," touched on two topics that appear to be particularly important for

students to grapple with—Black Power and the institutional nature of white supremacy. For students, the stereotypes around both of these subjects are every bit as strong as the mythology featuring King and Parks and, in fact, the pieces often reinforce each other. Most students have absorbed the lesson—almost without exception—that Black Power was “violent and racist,” that it was “where the civil rights movement went wrong.” At the same time, they tend to have a very limited and narrow understanding of white supremacy. They are generally taught that “racism is embodied by the N-word and burning crosses.” Movement era violence is typically set up as *the* primary form of white resistance, but sometimes even that violence is downplayed. A student recently explained that he had the “impression that the absolute worst thing about being black in the South was having to use a different water fountain.” For him, one of the most important things about studying the movement was coming to understand much more clearly “what was at stake.”<sup>17</sup>

Chris Basso effectively captures the stereotypical good sixties, bad sixties framing of Black Power that reinforces the notion that white supremacy was embodied in the actions of a few extremists.

The civil rights movement is seen as being good, the Black Power movement as being bad. The civil rights movement turns into this distorted picture of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, white liberals, and the federal government going to battle against crazy southern racists and their segregationist society. Once that was over, due to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act, the civil rights movement was over, and black people and other minorities should have had nothing else to complain about. But reckless and irresponsible blacks in the ghettos started pointless riots and started screaming Black Power for no good reason. This is pretty much what most people see the civil rights and Black Power movement as.<sup>18</sup>

Claire Ruswick thought of Black Power as a “dangerous and radical movement, maybe even like a cult,” a picture that came primarily from the movie *Forrest Gump*. After studying Black Power, she concluded “that I had been misled, like most of America, to believe that Black Power was a shallow movement that was only based on hatred and anger.”<sup>19</sup>

After a Spring 2008 class, one white student reflected, “I always believed the racist stereotypes that Black Power was an angry, violent, mob-type movement that used guns and violence to get their way. . . . I only saw it as a way for blacks to get things they wanted, things that *they* didn’t deserve to

have (affirmative action-type things), because whites had them.” Chris Bruce, who went to a New York City public high school that was almost 100 percent minority, learned about Black Power during “black history month.” He recalls, “I always walked away with the notion that Black Power was the equivalent of white supremacists and the Ku Klux Klan.” In a group discussion with students who had similar experiences, regardless of the racial make-up of their high schools, he considered the reasons for this pervasive miseducation. “I began to wonder if this was the result of the high school curriculum’s Cliffs Notes version of the movement or was it something more than that? Was it a way to discredit members of the movement by calling them irrational and crazy like Hasan Jeffries said in his speech?”<sup>20</sup>

Jeffries’s talk was eye-opening for students as he broke down some of the strategies used to trivialize Black Power and obscure nationwide institutional white supremacy. Claire Ruswick explains,

According to Jeffries, throughout the history of black-white relations in America, people have used the excuse of “crazy Negroes” to ignore the real issues at stake. Just as southern whites used the term “outside agitators” to convince themselves that “their” blacks were happy, and it was just outsiders that were stirring up problems, Americans have used the idea of the “crazy Negroes” to convince themselves that blacks bringing their issues to the public, and speaking openly about social change, are just crazy. Americans hide behind the term “crazy” so they don’t have to deal with the fact that these blacks might be speaking the truth about a deep-seated and real problem in America.<sup>21</sup>

Joe Zurro recalls not being sure he agreed with Jeffries when he first heard the presentation. After talking with his classmates and watching it again, however, he reflected, “I think one of the reasons Jeffries’s speech resonated so much with me was because I had been guilty of what he warned against. What I think he was trying to get across to us was that we cannot make judgments, at least fair judgments, about an individual based on that individual’s personality. By ‘explaining away’ Carmichael as a prophet of rage, and Malcolm X as a hateful person, we miss so much about what it is they are trying to get across. We get lost in the way they speak it, and refuse to examine critically the meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

For Zurro and others, this idea was brought home most forcefully by Jeffries’s example of Martin Luther King Jr. and the ways that, during his

lifetime, he, too, was often portrayed as a "Crazy Negro." Reflecting on Jeffries's talk, Chris Basso writes, "In the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King is a saint. He was passive-resistant, he protested in a peaceful way and other people should try to emulate him. This completely ignores the fact that at times in his career, King was demonized by almost everybody. . . . He was that 'crazy Negro.' It makes me wonder whom today we think is just crazy and out of control?" A week later, Basso was still considering this question. "For many people in this country, Martin Luther King had a dream that white people and black people could live together. Problem solved, King is a hero. Like Judy Richardson said at the conference, 'Where is the King that called for a radical redistribution of wealth?' It's simply not taught, because that's Black Power rhetoric (if people even get to hear that part after all the 'hate whitey' nonsense) and because Martin Luther King solved all the nation's problems of race." He asks, "Why aren't we taught about the Martin Luther King that the government hated? He was a 'crazy Negro' in most people's eyes. Why is that so easily forgotten?"<sup>23</sup>

Students were just as struck by Jeffries's analysis of "out-of-control-crackers." Chris Bruce explains, "By calling Bull Connor an 'out-of-control cracker' you reduce white supremacy and the obstacles blacks had to face at the time." Basso reiterates that "[w]hat people fail to acknowledge is the deep systemic racism involved. The system of segregation was much more than the authority [of] restaurant owners, mayors, and crazy governors. Not to mention, this interpretation lets the northern racism, and the national racism in general, off the hook." He argues that "[d]emonizing certain characters in history as crazy racist white people allows for people to completely ignore the racism in their own lives, schools, communities, families, state, country. Racism only amounts to using the N-word and lighting crosses on fire." Arguing that "[p]eople still see racism as being individualistic rather than systemic," he followed Jeffries's lead and addressed Hurricane Katrina, which had hit New Orleans just seven months before, asking, "Why is a huge portion of our population (which conspicuously is also black) living at levels of poverty that are only attributed to Third World countries when so many in our country live in a disgusting amount of wealth and opportunity?" Then he offered a partial answer, "I feel like people think, 'Well, we're not racist. I mean yeah, there's a huge population of black people in New Orleans who are poor, but Condoleezza Rice is in the Cabinet.'"<sup>24</sup> As this suggests, when students develop a complex understanding of how white supremacy worked during the

movement, they are often less likely to see it as something limited to either the past or the South. They begin to explore the ways it operates today and in the places they call home.

As part of their conference preparation, the students in the Ella Baker Reading Group read Jeffries's dissertation on the Lowndes County, Alabama, civil rights movement. As a result, they already had access to an unusually detailed and nuanced picture of both Black Power and white supremacy as it looked through the lens of a rural southern community. Even before hearing Jeffries's talk, they had rejected most of their stereotypical views of Black Power. However, as important as Jeffries's work can be in helping students approach Black Power with more complexity and insight, students appear to be particularly engaged by his portrait of the Lowndes County movement (and the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Party [LCFP], symbolized by the snarling Black Panther) as a significant moment in American democracy. In Lowndes, SNCC's egalitarian approach to organizing combined with the "freedom rights" vision of local African Americans to form the basis for what Jeffries calls "freedom politics."<sup>25</sup> Students seem hungry for this alternative to "politics as usual" and they appear to have little trouble seeing this history of African Americans in rural Alabama as relevant to them and their lives. After reading Jeffries's dissertation, Claire Ruswick commented on "how close" the LCFP "came to reaching the values that the American political system is supposed to stand for." She saw it as a model demonstrating that "it is possible to have the kind of political participation and organization necessary to form a government that actually represents the people" and suggested that the LCFP offered a far more helpful story of democratic possibility than the George Washington story typically presented to schoolchildren.<sup>26</sup>

Two other groups of Geneseo students have read Jeffries's work—a manuscript draft and the recently published *Bloody Lowndes*—and had an opportunity to discuss it with him. In each case, they have responded to many of the same themes and details, quickly abandoning the pervasive and superficial characterization of Lowndes—as epitomizing all the stereotypical negatives of Black Power—to focus instead on what it illustrates about the potential of "freedom politics." As one student explained, "In 1965, the African American locals held the majority of the vote in Lowndes County, yet voter registration or black candidates' election into office wasn't the ultimate goal of the movement." Instead, they wanted the "local black community to remain politically engaged. Creating political education, voter awareness, and

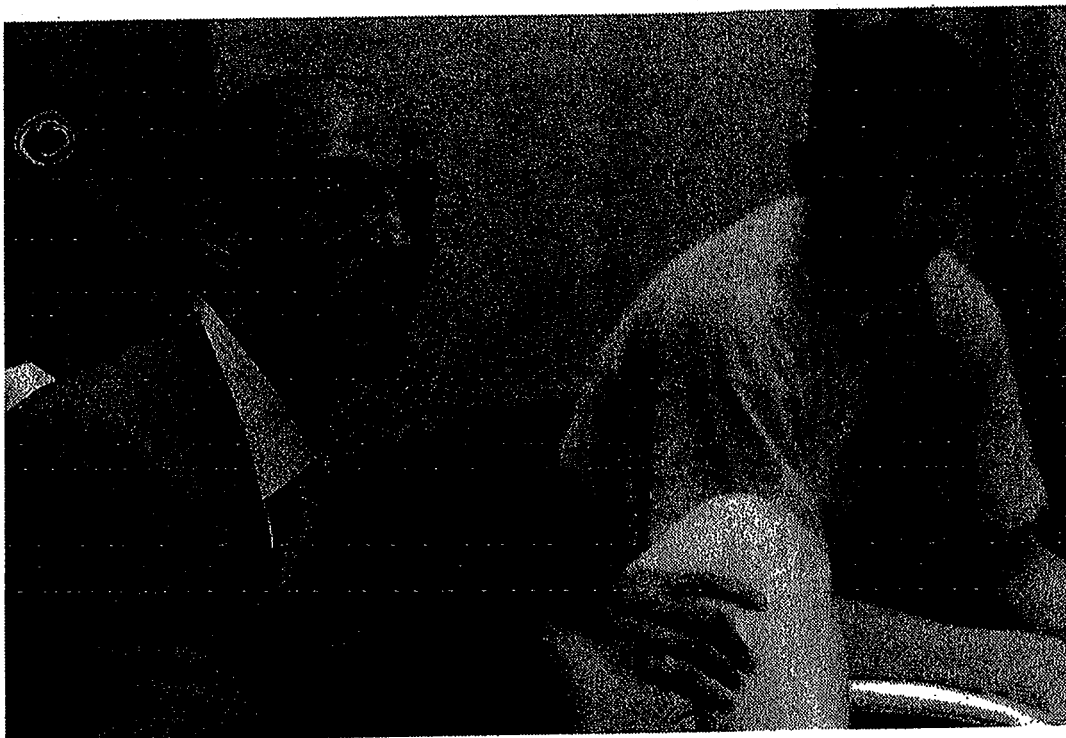


Figure 35 Hasan Kwame Jeffries with Geneseo students, September 2007. Photograph by Ben Gajewski, courtesy of SUNY Geneseo.

holding people accountable, is the basis of Freedom Politics.” Another student commented on “the importance of personal responsibility in obtaining freedom rights—a responsibility that cannot be delegated to ‘leaders.’” He was particularly struck by the fact that the “Lowndes County Freedom Party had a platform before it had any candidates” and what that said about the importance of people as “an integral part of a democratic process.”<sup>27</sup>

In fact, many students are drawn to the idea of “freedom politics,” both historically and in terms of contemporary society. One described it as “incredibly compelling” and an important alternative, while another wrote “freedom politics are exactly what the American government needs.” During Jeffries’s spring 2010 visit to Geneseo, students appreciated both his scholarship and his willingness to use a historical lens to tackle contemporary political issues. Responding to audience questions, Jeffries made a clear distinction between having an African American president and “freedom politics.” Quite a few students reacted positively to this point and to Jeffries’s willingness to evaluate President Barack Obama’s actions. One wrote, “[P]erhaps my favorite moment . . . was his critique of Obama’s failure to speak out on issues of race and injustice.” Another highlighted the distinction Jeffries made

between “black visibility” and “black power” or, as another student wrote, “why it is important to not simply get blacks elected but to get people elected who speak to the needs of the black community, for instance.” One student summed up the response of many, writing, “[A]lthough the heyday of freedom politics seems behind us, Prof. Jeffries was able to convey an element of optimism for the future and at the same time challenge us to remember that what’s past is prologue.”<sup>28</sup>

Although the mythology that passes for the civil rights movement history in much of our society is a triumphant story that can work to help protect white privilege and the idea of American triumphalism, many students, regardless of race, embrace the opportunity to learn a more accurate, realistic history. At the end of a Fall 2008 class, one white student reflected that he began the semester knowing only the predictable “Disney-style historical narrative that . . . was a story of redemption and good swiftly defeating evil, with a few big heroes like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks.” He found that “[t]he truth, as always, is much more complicated, much less pretty and rosy, and much more grass roots.” He preferred this, noting, “It felt much more honest and much more humane to be taught that the struggle for black rights was not just a linear one—that things did not just continually get better and better after 1954, that it wasn’t just that whites woke up one day and saw the error and immorality of their ways.” Another white student commented that a class on Black Power was both her most difficult and her favorite because it “forces me to think in new ways and to get past personal feelings when I’m researching, reading, or discussing an issue.” After a class on movement historiography, a student wrote, “[I]n a way I feel liberated.” He speculated that many people avoid a serious discussion of “civil rights because they are afraid that when race comes up the whole world will erupt. However, in this class . . . we embraced it, took it, and analyzed it. What we came out with was very enlightening and I have a whole new look on civil rights and the struggle for equality in every sense.”<sup>29</sup>

For many students, learning complex, bottom-up movement history extends well beyond historical literacy. It gives them knowledge and skills that they can use to better understand contemporary issues and reconsider previously unexamined assumptions. While many become angry and dismayed about the distortions that masquerade as history, at the same time, they often feel empowered as they develop a stronger knowledge base and new skills. They look to the movement for inspiration and as a model. At the end of a



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# Civil Rights History from the Ground Up

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