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Q&A

# The VISITOR'S CORNER with Judy Richardson

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Filmmaker, educator, and activist Judy Richardson has spent over six decades helping everyday people place themselves at the center of the Black freedom movement. For Richardson, knowledge-building, community mobilization, and radical transformation have always been of a piece. She worked on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama from 1963 to 1966 before cofounding Drum & Spear, once the largest African American bookstore in the United States. Richardson was on the team, first as series associate producer and then as education director, for all fourteen hours of the landmark PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*, and she has produced documentaries for PBS, the History Channel, and museums. A member of the editorial board for the SNCC Digital Gateway and board of directors for the SNCC Legacy Project, she has codirected two National Endowment for the Humanities teacher institutes on "Teaching Grassroots Movements."

The co-editor of the anthology *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (University of Illinois, 2010), she has been a visiting professor at Brown University and holds an honorary doctorate from Swarthmore College. She currently is codirecting the new visitor center film for the National Park Service's Frederick Douglass House in Washington, DC, and is working on three other museum films related to African American history. In February 2024, Adriane Lentz-Smith interviewed the SNCC activist about Black history as a site of mobilization and transformation, and about what we all stand to learn—and gain—from Black freedom struggles.

### How did you learn about Black history as you were growing up? *What* did you learn?

I learned next to nothing. One of the things I realized when I got into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is that the Black folks in SNCC actually knew a whole lot of Black history. Now, they may have known only *certain* people, depending upon the homes that they grew up in or the Black teachers that they had, but certainly they knew W. E. B. Du Bois. They always knew Booker T. Washington, and they always knew Frederick Douglass. I knew about neither. They also usually knew about Harriet Tubman. I don't think I knew anything about Harriet Tubman; I did not learn about any Black folks except as enslaved people until I got into SNCC.

I grew up in Tarrytown, New York, a factory town about thirty-five miles north of New York City. The textbook we used in my AP history class at Sleepy Hollow High School included a chapter on Reconstruction. I was in tenth grade, and this was the first time I had seen *anything* about Black folks. It was maybe two or three paragraphs. It had an illustration that I later found out from historian John Dittmer was a graphic from *The Clansman*, on which, of course, *Birth of a Nation* is based. The illustration was a line drawing, and it showed a Scalawag at a desk. Near

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him is a Black man with his clothes torn and his hair all disheveled. There was nothing about the amazing reforms enacted during Reconstruction that not only helped Black people, but poor whites as well. Nothing about the Black legislators who created those reforms.

The problem was, I was the only Black student in that class. So my fellow students begin surreptitiously looking back at me, and I wanted to sink into the ground. This was the only time I or my classmates had seen any images or information about Black folks in a textbook. And the message that we're all getting is: this is what happens when you allow Black people to have any positions of authority or control.

Nor did I get Black history at home. I know there were households where folks read the *Brownies' Book* or something similar, but I didn't get any of that. We got *Ebony* and *Jet*. I read a lot, but I was reading people like Willa Cather. I was not reading Black history because nobody was pointing me in that direction; my mother had an eighth-grade education, played a mean jazz piano, read the news, and looked at "Meet the Press"—she was in the world. But she did not talk that much about race. And because I did not know the history of race in America, when things happened to me that were clearly racist, as I look back on them, my assumption was that it was personal. I did not have any context for it. The main thing that saved me was SNCC. I was amazed when I got into SNCC and found out there are all these Black anticolonial struggles. I did not know about any of them.

I got the same feeling when I worked on *Eyes on the Prize*. Everything was exposing me to more and more information and giving me the academic tools. When you do a documentary, you really do have to immerse yourself, not just in the interviews that you're conducting with people who are in it, but you have to immerse yourself in the scholarship. So, I read Richard Kluger's *Simple Justice*, and it was the first time I realized you could story-tell history. I read *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King's account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and was thrilled to finally encounter the name of a female leader: Joanne Robinson.

Plus, I was hearing from other SNCC people and seeing beyond my own experience. When I interviewed local Mississippi Delta leader Amzie Moore for example, Amzie mentioned something about a meeting in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, in 1951 or 1952, and he said that 15,000 Black people attended. At first, I thought maybe he was a little demented, because I knew what *we* went through in the early 1960s, and he's talking about the early 1950s in Mississippi. 15,000 Black people, and they did not all get killed?! It was the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), and I had never heard of them. It was historian John Dittmer who confirmed the RCNL history during production of *Eyes*. Now, I'm sure Bob [Moses] had heard of them, and I suspect Charlie [Cobb] and Ivanhoe [Donaldson] had, but I never knew this. What's great is that now I can refer people to the Regional Council of the Negro Leadership link on the SNCC Digital Gateway to see primary source documents about the meetings.

In the 1980s, during production "school" for *Eyes,* I was learning from the scholars, from the movement organizers, and hearing from people like John Doar, head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, and from those in the media. I remember Bob Moses telling me about how, when he first stayed with Amzie Moore in Cleveland, Mississippi, in 1961, Amzie told Bob: "You young people can do sit-ins if you want to. But I know our power is going be around the right to vote." This was the first time I was hearing this story. I was learning about this history in a larger way than I'd even understood during my work with SNCC.

**When you were a younger person becoming involved in activism, did you think that you had something to learn from older generations? What did intergenerational learning and training look like when you first became involved? Has it changed over the years?**

For me it had to do with Ella Baker. You cannot talk about SNCC without talking about Miss Baker. Even though she wouldn't know me from Eve, I watched how she moved in meetings.

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I watched how she asked questions. She gave us both her grassroots organizing strategies and her networks. It wasn't just what she learned from having been Director of Branches for the NAACP; it was also that she always supported grassroots leadership: she's staying with Rosa Parks in Montgomery. She knows E. D. Nixon. She knows that Nixon is the kind of local leader that people like Gloster Current at the NAACP National office in New York don't want to hear from, because, to him, they're "the great unwashed." But for her, this is the base. So when she goes to Florida, she's staying with local NAACP leader Harry Moore and his wife, Harriette, a teacher; they were killed as a result of the bombing of their house on Christmas Day. These are her people. It's her network that she passes on to us. The reason Bob goes to Amzie Moore in Mississippi is because Miss Baker has sent him to Amzie. Amzie is part of her network.

Generational learning comes with these network ties. Amzie Moore was teaching and strategizing when he takes out a precinct map, lays it out on his kitchen table, and says to Bob, "Okay, this is where the bulk of Black folks live. But I'm not ready for you here in Cleveland. I don't have the organization yet, but C. C. Bryant has it down in Southwest Mississippi." He knows that because of his own network, since both he and Bryant are founders of the RCNL. The other thing we learn from Miss Baker is to look for the natural local leaders in all these areas where we organize. Miss Baker always reinforced the idea that we SNCC people were not the leaders. What we should try to do is find, support, and sustain the local leadership that would remain after we left … or got killed. Those strong local leaders would still be there.

Derrick Johnson, the current head of the NAACP, used to be the head of the Mississippi NAACP, and he talks about how he learned to organize from the SNCC organizing tradition. He learned from SNCC folks like Charles McLaurin and Hollis Watkins.

**It feels a bit odd to include you in the "Visitor's Corner" section of *Modern American History* because, in addition to being a civil rights activist yourself, you have also produced, taught, and supported vital histories of the movement. How do you understand the relationship between knowledge production, education, and activism?**

I see everything that I do as a continuity of my work in SNCC. I moved to Northern Light Productions after having worked on the fourteen-hour PBS series, *Eyes on the Prize* (on production, and then as its education director), *Malcolm X: Make it Plain*, and other the films at Blackside Productions. I had done some freelance in between, and then somebody asked me to write/direct the visitor center film for the Museum of African-American History in Boston on Beacon Hill. Through that, I met the head of Northern Light, who then asked me to join their staff as a senior producer. So I produced/directed two History Channel documentaries, both on enslavement and resistance, and then the Orangeburg Massacre and a bunch of other films. I left in 2010, just as we were publishing *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. Now I'm a consulting producer with Northern Light.

We recently produced the film for the Selma National Park Service site. It focuses on the young people who were fourteen or fifteen years old back then who organized prior to Bloody Sunday. It's not on King. It's not on John Lewis. It's on the young people: SNCC coming in, the young local people energizing the adults and how it changed them. We also produced *Legacy of Courage*. That film explores how Black folks in Boston have used the law throughout history to create social change. It covers organizing around the education rights movement—not focused so much on the 1972 busing events, but on the historical events leading up to it. It's distributed by Primary Source, a Boston-based teacher professional development group.

It's all a throughline. I continue to teach the history in a way that people see *themselves* in that history. Not some big leader, but see that they can make change themselves.

In SNCC, it's not just that I learned from Charlie Cobb and his concept for Freedom Schools during Mississippi Freedom Summer—and he comes from a long line of educators; it's that I was tapping into the SNCC education ethos when I came up with the idea of a Residential

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Freedom School. We brought young activists from our Southern projects together with some of the Northern kids who were part of our Friends of SNCC group in Chicago. We anticipated that the Southern kids' energy and the sense that they really could change things would infect and energize the Northern kids, who understood what it was like to be "Up South" and were used to having Black politicians who were not going to change anything. That way, the Southern kids would see that just getting Black folks in power did not make change; it had to be continued activism and pressure. And the Northern kids would learn organizing from the Southern kids and think, "We're the same age as these southern kids. Maybe we could do that here in Chicago."

Jim Forman, SNCC's executive secretary, always talked about staff education: "Read. Write it down. This is history!" He was always talking about, "You're in a historical moment, and you need to write it down so that people have your understanding of it." He had been a history major, and he firmly believed that you have to interpret your own history, now and in the future. We also produced a Black history book called *The Freedom Primer*, which we used in SNCC's freedom schools and sent out to Freedom Schools in Brooklyn, Chicago, all over through our Friends of SNCC network.

We were very clear in SNCC that you had to have documentation. We had Jack Minnis as head of our research department because Forman understood that you need somebody who can do research. Minnis just read everything, researched who were the movers and shakers, who had economic control of a town before a SNCC person went in to organize there. He understood the importance in 1964 of doing a *Chronology of Violence and Intimidation in Mississippi from 1961 to 1964*. We used that chronology as part of the press packet that we gave to all the media that came with the white student volunteers recruited to work on voter registration during the 1964 Freedom Summer. Minnis does this because it shows that it's not just some crazy governor or mayor or sheriff in Jackson. We could point to this and say, "It's systemic, folks. It's systemic."

That was a new thing for us then. Now, people always assume, "It's systemic," but most people did not know that then. SNCC emphasized that the problem lies with men like Mississippi's Senators [John C.] Stennis (D) and [James O.] Eastland (D). They kept getting reelected, and they kept having this power as the head of the Armed Services Committee and other committees with money and power because Black folks were prevented from voting. Our documentation allowed people from New York or Chicago to understand, "The fact that *Black folks in Mississippi are not allowed to* vote affects *you* because that means you don't get some stuff that you want, because these horrible people are controlling the policies that affect you."

We have carried this commitment to documenting forward. The SNCC Legacy Project has been working with the Duke University Libraries on a Mellon-funded project called, "Our Story, Our Terms." One component is focused on intergenerational discussions: SNCC vets talking with current activists from groups like Dream Defenders and BYP 100. The second component focuses on archiving, working with a Black archivist at Duke who also found Black archivists who can work with each of the organizations to help those young activist organizations archive their material. That documentation will help those groups tell the story in the way that they want to tell it now and in the future.

**Do you see Drum and Spear—first, the bookstore, then the press—as similar kind of work?**

Drum and Spear Bookstore was started primarily by SNCC folks: Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox, Curtis Hayes, and me. The store continued the throughline that if you give people the information, it can empower them. It became the largest Black bookstore in the country. We stocked books by DuBois, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Jomo Kenyatta. We had books about Lumumba. We had all this material on the anticolonial struggle in Africa, the struggles going on in Central America. Then, I decided I wanted to do a children's section because children's books by and about children of color *weren't* being included at

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Brentano's, which was the major bookstore chain back then. Our stocking children's books coincided with Elementary and Secondary Educucation Act (ESEA), funding from the federal government to schools that stipulated that schools had to show that the material they were using in the classes was representative of the community in which they were sited. As a result, we're stocking Lucille Clifton and Eloise Greenfield, and *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson*, all these wonderful books.

Charlie Cobb's aunt, Dr. Charlotte Brooks, was Superintendent of English for the DC public schools. We started attracting teachers and librarians to the store, and they're saying, "How come nobody told us about this children's book or that children's book?" It was eye opening for them. But for all of us who are at SNCC, it was a continuity. What we were doing at the bookstore was the same thing we were doing in the Freedom Schools and the same thing we were doing when we were organizing throughout the Deep South. It was what we did in Lowndes County, Alabama when we wrote voter registration comic books. Poor Black (and white) folks had been denied an education, so we made the materials basic. We explained, "This is how you run for Circuit Court judge," or, "This is what a magistrate does." The same was true with the bookstore and the press. It was, "There is this wealth of material about us, who we are, what we did, where we came from. And we're going to share this with you."

We would have these book events. Toni Morrison would come. Amiri Baraka would come. We even had Shirley Graham Du Bois do a book talk. It was the African diaspora, but it was also other people of color. So we had people like Lawrence Yep, a Japanese-American author who wrote young adult books. We wanted those who came into our store to see other people of color in the fullest sense.

As a matter fact, I can't remember how we found out about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but we started carrying it. Once the women who were working at the bookstore read it, we were like, "Oh, my God, it's a Black romance!" We were physically grabbing women as they come into the store, saying, "You've got to read this!" Because we were not just educating for action. It was also just educating in a way that reinforced the fullness of yourself, of your people.

Then, we started Drum and Spear Press. We published Eloise Greenfield's first book, *Bubbles*, also *A History of Pan African Revolt* by C. L. R. James, and *Enemy of the Sun*, a Palestinian poetry book, which people have recently been asking us about. The idea was, it's not just that you provide the books. It is also that there are authors who cannot get published. And all that was done with the aim of giving the Black community the greatest breadth of understanding about who they were, what they did, where they came from, and their connection to the wider world. And Jennifer Lawson, also former SNCC, did illustrations for both the Lowndes County materials and for many of the Drum and Spear Press publications. Then she, Courtland, and Charlie moved to Tanzania for two years and started a division of Drum and Spear Press there, aligned with East African Publishing House.

### For many folks, *Eyes on the Prize* sets the parameters of their knowledge of the civil rights movement. Are there parts of that history that you find particularly telling or that you wish people spent more time thinking about?

With the first series of *Eyes on the Prize*, we did not give people enough insight into the strains of Black nationalism and self-defense that run through the Black political tradition, and that was actually part of the traditional civil rights movement covered in that first series. The result is that you get to *Eyes II* and it's like whiplash. Part of the problem is that we didn't tell the story such that people could understand what happens with Black Power or why people start declaring, "We'd rather build our own house than keep trying to get into yours."

I advocated for more context in *Eyes II*. Henry Hampton, the founder of Blackside and the series executive producer, originally wanted to start the Black Power episode with the call for Black Power on the 1966 Meredith March. I argued that viewers would not understand the call

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for Black Power unless they understood that SNCC and local organizers were already showing what Black Power looked like, on the ground, through the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) in Alabama and the political party it forms. Black Power was not some theoretical idea that Stokely was proposing. I also suggested that we reprise a bit of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) segment from *Eyes I*, because the impetus for SNCC's organizing an all-Black political party in Lowndes County was due to the betrayal the MFDP experienced at the 1964 Democratic convention. But he rejected that idea due to time constraints. He also rejected my assertion that the Lowndes County party was all-Black. "No, they weren't," he said, even though I reminded him I was actually there at the time. Fortunately, we now have Hasan Jeffries's *Bloody Lowndes*, and his intro says, "They were building an all-Black political party." The scholarship is so important, particularly if it incorporates the lived experiences of the people who made that history.

Back in 1988–1990, when we made *Eyes*, we did not have the local movement scholarship that we have now. For example, we did not have Jeanne Theoharis's biography of Rosa Parks. In 1987 I was reading an *Eyes* treatment for the Montgomery episode and said, "You know, I think it's important that we say that this is a very organized Black community that Doctor—at that point Reverend—King is coming into." And I was told, "We have no scholarship or documentation for that."

I don't know how, but I found out that the Schomburg had the dissertation of somebody who had had gone through the Black press' coverage of the boycott, and I found his index cards with citations from the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, I think. Those citations documented the folks who were part of the community, the Black leadership in Montgomery at that time: the Black men's clubs, the Voter League, the Women's Political Council. I sent the citations to the series producer, and so now you hear a line in that Montgomery segment that says, "It was a highly organized Black community." That was because I was able to find some early documentation—even before the advent of local movement scholarship—that would confirm what I was saying.

Perhaps most fundamentally, one of the things that we only vaguely touched on in *Eyes* was the way that good movements transform the people who participate in them; instead, the series is more about events. Currently, our SNCC Legacy Project is working on a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant that's collaborating with six historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and six civil rights museums on grassroots organizing. At the inaugural event, on "Arts and Culture in the Movement," historian Emilye Crosby played a clip of Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, a scholar, youth organizer, and former SNCC Freedom Singer, talking about the importance of song. However, what she is really talking about is transformation. Singing the songs really changed people inside. They became "new people." And what you don't get enough of in *Eyes* is a sense that it's not solely that the movement is changing history; it's also changing the people who participate in the movement and showing them how powerful they can be.

**In recent years, I have grown impatient with well-meaning people who tend to equate Black life with suffering. How do we talk and write about joy in the African American community and in the freedom struggles more broadly?**

Some of it, of course, is the music. In SNCC, we sang a lot. When people try to suppress Black history by saying, "Oh, we don't want to make our kids angry or sad," they are missing something key: there was a joy in seeing the first person go up to register to vote. Or joy in finally getting out of jail. I remember—I think this is Atlanta, so it wasn't like it was horrible—but we came out after about five days. We'd been on a hunger strike. We all come into this church, and they're singing freedom songs. "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" in this humongous Black church, and they're all singing in harmony. Then I start smelling the fried chicken. And it's like all of this: It's the smells. It's the voices. There was a way that you felt lifted up. I'm not

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churched, but still it felt like levitating, like you went someplace else where the sense was: "They can't touch us." There was just such joy.

Also, remember, many of us were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old, so we had house parties. And, more so the guys, but also the women, if you were out organizing in rural areas, you went to the juke joints on the weekends. Part of that was also organizing: people need to know you outside of your talking about voter registration. They need to know you're like them, that you drink and you dance. But SNCC workers also went because they needed to let off steam with other Black folks and in a place that was away from the bullets and the billy clubs, at least for a little bit.

Finally, people talk about SNCC being a band of brothers and sisters in a circle of trust. There is a sense that we surrounded ourselves with people who really think things can change. I'm still in that: the reason I can keep going is because I am encircled by all these people who say, "Yeah, we have to keep going." And I, in turn, have to remind them when they say, "Oh, we're passing the torch." Instead, I say, "Honey, Miss Baker never passed the torch." She assumed, "I'm on one side of this, and you're on the other side, and we're both running this marathon. And then at some point I'm going to have to fall back. Somebody will take my place. But I'm not going to just let go of the baton. No, I'm going be holding the other side until I can't do it anymore."

That sense is everywhere around me because I'm still doing all these projects with this group that I've now known for sixty-some years who really do believe that organizing for social change is essential, and it works, and we'll keep doing it till they carry us out of here.

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