

SESSION FOUR:
POLITICAL RACE, FAITH
AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

SI KAHN*

*My hands are as cracked as an August field
That has burned in the sun for a hundred years
With furrows so deep, you could hide yourself
But I ain't choppin' cotton no more this year*

*I'll just sit on the porch with my evil eye
And watch for a change of wind
The rows are as straight as a shotgun barrel
And long as a bullet can spin*

*You know how hot it gets in Mississippi
You know how dry it gets in the summer sun
The dust clouds swirl all down the Delta
I just hope that I don't die 'fore the harvest comes*

*Black clouds gatherin' on the edge of town
But no rain's gonna fall on us
Hoes rise and fall in a distant field
Earth takes a beating for all of us*

*I thought I heard the Angel of Death overhead
It was only the crop duster's plane
Hoes rise and fall like the beating of wings
Lord, send us freedom and rain*

* Si Kahn is the Director of Grassroots Leadership. Kahn has spent more than thirty years working as a grassroots activist, beginning at age twenty-one with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), later as a union organizer and currently as founding director of Grassroots Leadership, a group committed to multiracial organizing and building a strong progressive movement in the South. Kahn is also well known as a singer/songwriter.

*You know how hot it gets in Mississippi
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I came of age as a white Jewish organizer in (to use Professors Guinier and Torres's phrase) "a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others." The movement was the Southern Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s. I was a volunteer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ("SNCC"), the militant student wing of that movement, working in the Mississippi River Delta on the Arkansas side in the summer of 1965.

As a newly arrived and relatively inexperienced volunteer organizer that summer, I had no doubt that all the leaders of SNCC and of the Southern Civil Rights Movement were African Americans. The local leaders of the movement in Forrest City, Arkansas (named after General Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan) were all Black. The local SNCC project leader was Black, as were the great majority of the SNCC staff and volunteers. The community in which we lived, the community that sheltered, nurtured and protected the SNCC workers, was exclusively Black; beyond the boundaries of the Black community lay white communities, which offered only threat and danger. The visible leaders of SNCC, who occasionally arrived from national headquarters in Atlanta, who spoke with us and framed the movement in broader political terms, were Black: I remember picking up James Foreman and Julian Bond at the Memphis airport and driving them to an Arkansas statewide strategy retreat. The leaders of the major national civil rights organizations were all African Americans: John Lewis at SNCC, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at SCLC, James Farmer at CORE, Roy Wilkins at the NAACP, Whitney Young at the Urban League.

I am speaking now of my view in the summer of 1965, at the age of twenty-one, of how that particular world looked to me as someone whose main movement job was doing carpentry in Freedom Centers and repairing mimeographs, the now-extinct copying machines that preceded the Xerox generation. Later, with the benefit of hindsight and history books, I came to understand some of what was less visible to me at the time. Women leaders of SNCC and of the movement, such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, were excluded from formal organizational positions, even as they exercised extraordinary leadership and influence. Whites also played critical leadership roles, but generally not as visibly as those who were Black.

It was only years later, for example, that I realized the role played by my own uncle, Arnold Aronson. A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roy Wilkins and Arnie together founded the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Arnie worked behind the scenes with the more visible African American leadership of the movement on many critical

strategies, campaigns and events. Yet he was never a public spokesperson for the movement. In fact, for the rest of his long life, in which he continued to work on civil rights issues, he refused to speak or write about what he had done in the 1960s, believing that, in a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others, the role of the others is to support that movement, not to lead or speak for it.

Given how extraordinarily hard it is to build multiracial organizations even today, when we supposedly live in a more racially enlightened period than we did almost fifty years ago, how do we explain the willingness of many whites in the Southern Civil Rights Movement to accept the leadership of people of color, of African Americans? (Of course, not all whites accepted that leadership. Many resented it, rejected it, challenged it, tried to exercise their white power and privilege, attempted to take leadership.) For that matter, how do we explain the participation of whites in the Southern Civil Rights movement at all, given the historic reluctance of so many white progressives to participate in movements led by people of color? What was I doing there anyway?

Personally, I find it difficult and a little dangerous to try to explain almost forty years later why I did what I did way back then. The temptation of revisionism and political correctness is always there. Memory is misleading at best, even in the short term. But whatever I said or felt at the time, here's what I now think was really going on:

- I was influenced by peer pressure. Even on primarily white campuses, being involved in The Movement was a cool thing to do: picketing, marching, getting arrested (very cool), occupying buildings (really cool), "going South" (the coolest of all).
- I was raised by parents who were passionate about justice as an expression of their religious beliefs, who were outraged by the injustices done to African Americans, who were outspoken and active on civil rights—at the same time that they claimed they were "not political" and were simply doing "what was right." I was doing what my parents wanted me to do, even if I terrified them by doing it.
- I was raised by parents whose extended families lost heavily in the Holocaust and who therefore understood in their gut the dangers of any authoritarian racism. Although my folks never said this explicitly, the message I felt and learned clearly was, "If this can happen to Black people in the United States, it can happen to anyone, to us, to Jews."

No one ever said this to me directly. But I'm convinced that emotion was there, deeply there. The Southern Civil Rights movement began only fifteen years after World War II ended, partly because of the energy and anger brought back to the United States by returning African American war veterans. For Jews whose memories of the Holocaust were still bleeding wounds, the response of white racists to the Southern Civil Rights movement must have been terrifying,

consciously or unconsciously: the mobs, the Klan, the American Nazi party, the dogs, the guns, the sneering sheriffs, the violence against children as well as adults, the burnings, the murders. The enemies of African Americans were usually also enemies of the Jews. My mother remembered her childhood when the Klan burned a cross on their lawn. Frightened by the rise of right-wing racism but also proud of the resistance put up by Southern Black communities, how could so many Jews not have been moved?

To be clear: My parents were careful not to confuse the level of U.S. anti-Semitism in the 1960s (real, not to be taken lightly, but not an everyday problem for most Jews) with the level of racism against African Americans (out of control, virulent, violent, an immediate and daily threat and danger to every Black person). But they understood the Civil Rights movement, not just as "their fight," but as "our fight, too."

Of my three reasons for participating in the Southern Civil Rights movement, only this last approaches the concept of "political race" put forward by Professors Guinier and Torres as I understand it. As an organizer, I see political race as another way of thinking about common self-interest, the glue that binds political organizations and movements. As a white Jew in a movement led by people of color, I had a self-interest in seeing that the systems of violent repression being used against African Americans were stopped in their tracks, before they spread to others, before they spread to me and my family. The concept of political race may help explain the quite remarkable fact that, of the white participants in the Southern Civil Rights movement, the overwhelming majority were Jewish (estimates range from 50% on up, at a time when Jews made up less than 3% of the total U.S. population).

But, however much I, other Jews, and other whites may have seen the movement as "our fight, too," it really wasn't our fight in any immediate self-interested sense. Whites active in the Southern Civil Rights movement were concerned with ending segregation, with strengthening democracy. Blacks were concerned with economic and physical survival, with staying alive. Only in occasional moments were whites in the movement "raced black": on integrated picket lines, in restaurants (but only when eating with Black co-workers or when known as civil rights workers), in confrontations with the law and with vigilantes. Beyond those moments, we could step back into our white skins, disappear into the anonymity and privilege of whiteness. In many cases, we were stepping back into class privilege as well. Only a few of the white civil rights activists came from families that shared the desperate poverty of most Southern African Americans.

In this sense, the Civil Rights movement was not, after all, a "a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others." It was a Black movement *supported* by others. The others, the whites, did have a self interest in the movement, but not one that was politically raced. It was the self interest of all those who dream of a better world, a more democratic society, a

more just economy, who feel rightly that every injustice in some way diminishes them as well—a moral self interest, if you will. This is the John Donne argument: “Never ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” Well, yes and no. If there has to be a funeral, you’re better off as a mourner than as the deceased. And it’s easier if the deceased isn’t from your immediate family. But you still want to be there.

One challenge for a “political race project,” then, is to redefine “immediate family.” The politically raced immediate family needs to be multiracial. But while families may become multiracial because of love, when it comes to power, love is not the answer: sometimes necessary, never sufficient. Given the many reasons that so many people of color and whites consistently find *not* to be in personal or political relation with each other, building solidarity across this wide divide requires a set of self interests so overwhelming that they can overcome the negotiated inertia of many years. Put crassly, at least in the South, most white people and people of color would just as soon not have to deal with each other in serious ways and will only do so if they absolutely have to.

In my work as an organizer, I’ve seen this happen in two ways. The first is what I think of as “defensive organizing.” In this situation, a community is confronted with a threat, often from the outside, something that could at least partly destroy that community’s quality of life: a toxic or nuclear waste dump, a major land clearance, a prison, a high-voltage power line, a polluting industrial facility. To the extent that members of the community see this as a threat, they will mobilize to keep it from happening. To the extent that the community includes different racial groups, they will at least in the short run work together.

These situations, though, are not really suited for a “political race project.” Because they are defensive in nature, because the timetable is largely controlled by outside forces, they happen very quickly. The community needs to mobilize with remarkable speed if there is to be an effective opposition. So there is rarely the time and space to do the critical work of storytelling, interpersonal exploration, celebration, political discussion that can build what Guinier and Torres call the “charismatic community” and the “oppositional culture.”

There is also not time or space to develop a potentially transformative shared political understanding and agreement about the “big ideas.” Because the issue that brings community members together is limited, so is its potential. Even if an organization is founded to deal with the issue, it is not likely to survive beyond the immediate issue and campaign. If it does survive, it is unlikely to have a broad political perspective, since it was originally organized around a very specific goal. It was built to stop something rather than to start something. Winning means that the community’s quality of life will not get any worse, not that it will get better.

The second situation in which I’ve seen whites willing to participate in political movements led by people of color is where there was a common and ongoing economic self interest: the intersection of race and class, sometimes of

race, class and gender. Guinier and Torres are right to see the struggle of the Greensboro K-Mart workers as a good example of a "political race project." Their analysis bears out my own experiences working in the South with the United Mine Workers of America (where at least you don't need to explain what a "miner's canary" is) and with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, now part of UNITE.

I often heard white Southern coal miners and mill workers talk in terms that would fit a political race project. Sometimes, however, (and this is something the organizers of any such projects need to be thoughtful and strategic about), these comments had an edge, an undercurrent of racism. They'd say, "We need to learn from what the Black people are doing. They stick together. They don't let anyone push them around." What they often meant was, "If Black people can do that, you know white people should be able to do that. We're smarter to start with." They'd say, "We're not treated any better than Black people." They meant, "We should be treated better. We're white." So it's important not to romanticize the participation of whites in movements led by people of color, and to be careful about assessing motives and goals. Still, in organizing we start with where people are, not with where we wish they were.

There are some important lessons from Southern labor organizing in the 1970s. At that time, it was already clear that in most situations African American workers were much more likely to support union organizing drives than white workers (this was before the great influx of Spanish-speaking workers into the South and the textile industry). Generally, in the textile industry, you could count on 80% to 90% of Black workers voting for the union. Both labor and management had figured this out. Management's response was to establish a *de facto* ceiling of about 40% for African Americans in the workforce—go higher and you were virtually inviting the union organizers to town. If the union could get 80% of the Black workers in a vote (32% more or less of the bargaining unit), it needed about one third of the white workers (20% of the bargaining unit) for victory. In practice, this turned out to be about what was possible under the best of circumstances.

What this also meant was that, while African American workers were a minority in the plant, they were a majority within those actively working for the union. So the union organizing campaign became, by necessity if not by plan, "a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others." If the racist and anti-union traditions among white workers were too strong, they didn't participate and the union lost. If their desire for dignity and respect on the job, fairer treatment, better wages and working conditions was strong enough to outweigh their reasons *not* to be in a union with Black workers, then the union won.

These objective conditions made it easier for me as an organizer to take on racial issues directly. Black workers would say to me, publicly or privately, "Look, why do we need the whites? They're racists. They don't really want to

have anything to do with us anyway. If we start with the Black workers, focus on the issues that we care about most, like racism and discrimination, we can really mobilize and get the union in.” I’d point out that, under U.S. labor law, you have to get 50% of the votes—and there weren’t enough Black workers to get to that number. Further, I’d say, of course we want to deal with racism and discrimination. That’s part of what the union stands for. But, if we don’t make the campaign broad enough to include issues that white workers as well as Black workers care about, they’ve got no reason to want a union—which means Black workers won’t be able to get one either. In Guinier and Torres’s words, “Such a change might require black leadership and the leadership of other marginalized communities of color to articulate the consciousness of a racialized identity in broader terms than the current remedial strategies of the civil rights paradigm.”¹

White workers would say to me, publicly or privately, “Look, why do we need the Blacks? Most of the workers in this mill are white anyway, enough to win a union election, but they won’t join the union because they don’t want to be part of something that Blacks control. Start with the white workers, make it clear that’s who the leaders are going to be, and we can get those card signed like they were hotcakes. We’ve got nothing against the Blacks joining the union, but it just won’t work if they’re in charge.” I’d point out that, under U.S. labor law, you have to get 50% of the votes—and that, because of the anti-unionism endemic to Southern white mill workers since the failures of organizing in the 1930s and 1950s, white votes alone were never going to be enough in a mill that was 40% Black. Further, I’d say, the union is for everyone, not for Blacks and not for whites, but for all workers. If a Black worker is discriminated against by the company because they’re Black, the union is going to stand up for them, just as the union is going to stand up for any worker who’s being pushed around by management. Take it or leave it. Either everyone gets a union or no one gets one.

There’s an old civil rights song that starts, “They say that freedom is a constant struggle.” This is true of all organizing (“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”), but particularly of attempts to bring whites into organizations, campaigns, and movements led by people of color. There is a deeply delicate balancing act that takes place within the organizing committee or organization. Generally, my experience suggests that having about two-thirds people of color and one-third white people in the room, on the committee, on the board, on the picket line works best. If there are proportionately too many white people, people of color perceive, usually correctly, that they will eventually be pushed out of leadership and power. If the number of white people drops significantly, whites will decide that this is a “Black thing” and not for them. It’s worth noting the irony of these dynamics: Most whites seem to think having 10% people of color in the room is fair representation, but that having 10% white people in the

1. LANI GUINIER & GERALD TORRES, *THE MINER’S CANARY: ENLISTING RACE, RESISTING POWER*, TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY 25 (2002).

room means people of color have taken over; but this is an organizing and racial reality.

Having a significant majority of people of color helps ensure that leadership stays in those hands. But it also makes it easier for people of color who are not in the leadership to participate. When people of color are in the majority, not just power, but culture shifts. By reversing the usual ratio of participation and power in the dominant society, we open up the doors and the windows.

Perhaps because race so much defines the history and politics of the South, most Southern organizers carry this consciousness with them. Among other things, Southern organizers count. Ask organizers from most parts of the country what the racial balance in a meeting was and they'll answer either "pretty good" or "pretty bad." Ask Southern organizers and they'll give you an exact breakdown of how many people of color and how many whites there were, usually broken down by gender as well. When planning a meeting, an action, a leadership election, they'll consciously strategize so that a good racial balance (usually meaning a people of color majority) is maintained.

For example, at Grassroots Leadership, where I've worked since 1980, twelve of the seventeen board members are people of color. I believe that, on any racial justice issue, the white members of the board would be passionate advocates and would vote for the right thing. But if the board were to split on racial lines, the people of color control 70% of the votes. Personally, as a white founding executive director, this means that my power can be counterbalanced and overruled if necessary by people of color. If whites are to play leadership roles in democratic movements, this kind of counterbalancing is both healthy and critical.

All of us, people of color and white people, need to be conscious of the issues that create the possibility of progressive democratic movements led by people of color but joined by others. Our experience at Grassroots Leadership bears out what Professors Guinier and Torres write about "noticing the link between race and gender and between race and class and showing how poor white men are also victimized by a criminal justice system that tracks young black boys from kindergarten to prison rather than to college Even middle-class whites are forced to pay as education budgets shrink and prison budgets expand to accommodate this ill-informed public policy."²

Grassroots Leadership also observed these links several years ago and noted the political opportunity they create. We started by organizing against the privatization of public assets in several Southern states, including the growth of private prisons, in part because the transfer of public goods and services to private profit-making hands undercuts the well-being of both African Americans and whites, thereby creating the possibility for multiracial movement. Over time, we focused our anti-privatization efforts on the "criminal justice" system.

2. *Id.* at 30.

Within the broad movement against the prison-industrial complex, a movement led primarily by people of color, we have carved out a specific organizational niche by creating an organizing campaign that focuses on the abolition of for-profit private prisons. Our Southern statewide studies on "Education versus Incarceration," which document the link between increasing public dollars for prisons and decreasing funds for higher education, are an organizing tool specifically designed to help make these connections.

Of course, what goes around comes around. The same links and principles that make progressive democratic organizing possible can also be used to undermine and oppose progressive policies. In several local campaigns to stop for-profit private prisons from being established, we've been defeated by campaigns that involved both people of color and whites. Both Blacks and whites, desperate for jobs, have seen private (and public) prisons as their only realistic alternative and have fought to bring them to their communities—despite being well aware that their main use would be to warehouse young men of color.

We need to be sure from the beginning that not only our processes but also the policies and goals we work toward are progressive. If we do that, as Guinier and Torres write, we are then "challenged to move from a politics based primarily on a narrow definition of group or individual self-interest to action in service of a transformative vision of social justice."

How, in the real world of grassroots organizing, do we actually do this? Let me quote (with a few changes) from an article I wrote some years ago for the journal *Liberal Education*:

Because so few people have successful experiences in working multi-racially, there also is a real lack of knowledge about what to do and how to do it. When it comes to multiracial work, we lack the basic tools of the trade: the checklists, the do's and don'ts, the places to be watchful and careful, the insights and intuitions that can guide organizational work. We also lack the theory that hold these elements of practice together, that makes sense of the small details of daily work, that gives them unity and coherence. . . .

If significant social change is to be accomplished, it is essential that those of us involved in social change movements begin to identify and learn new theories and practices, principles and techniques, that can be used to resolve differences among people of color and white people. We must learn to use these principles to build internally strong and viable community-based organizations, which also can work together to create vibrant and creative networks and coalitions. In addition to the focus on race, special attention must be paid to issues of gender, class and distribution of power, which in turn also affect racial dynamics.

Ultimately, such a theory and practice can only be developed over time, by many people and organizations. But it is helpful to have a

number of hypotheses to test against our developing knowledge, some ideas with which we can argue, some points of departure for our action and reflection. In this spirit let me offer the bare bones of a theory of multi-racial organizing, some notes for building effective race relations within community and educational organizations and institutions. This framework-in-progress asserts that there are a number of specific principles that must be honored in order to create and maintain multi-racial organizations. When these principles are violated, racial conflict surfaces. Organizations and institutions which seek to address racial conflict must take these principles into account and establish or re-establish them internally. Such an institution or organization must have:

- 1) An *institutional* commitment (as distinct from a personal) commitment to racial equity which is clearly and forcefully stated.
- 2) An *analysis* of the institution's purposes which demonstrates convincingly that these purposes cannot be met without equity.
- 3) *Issues* that connect both the common and the differing self-interests of people of color and white people and that are of sufficient immediacy to overcome the substantial forces working against equity.
- 4) *Leaders*, both people of color and white people, who are personally committed to racial equity.
- 5) A *political will*, shared by all participants, to enforce the structures and rules relating to equity, even under enormous pressure.
- 6) *Structures* of both governance and administration that share and/or rotate leadership and decision-making power among people of color and white people, and which ensure that white people must accept the leadership of people of color, not just vice versa.
- 7) *Equity* as a clear principle in agreements on division of all other resources, including money, power, seniority, job security, access and publicity.
- 8) *Internal education*, aimed at both white people and people of color, which explicitly deals with both positive (equity) and negative (racism) issues.
- 9) A *common opposition* as well as common issues. Often what unites us is not only what/whom we are for, but what/whom we are against.
- 10) *Processes* that demonstrate, at all levels, an institutional commitment to equity: how and where meetings are held, how and

to whom information is circulated, how and when decisions are made.

11) *Safe spaces* within which these processes can be worked through: places to meet and talk where people of color and white people feel equally comfortable and powerful.

12) *Culture* that is balanced among people of color and white people and that is comparably accessible to each: norms of public and private speech, food, music, humor, art, history, stories.

13) *Social occasions* as well as public events in which both personal and political relations can develop.

14) *Consistency* in and among principles and practices, along with the attention to detail that ensures their continuity.

15) *Mutuality* among people of color and white people in terms of responsibility for all of these principles, practices and processes.³

Perhaps it's time to revisit the words of the old civil rights song, "Black and white together, we shall not be moved." Maybe it's time to be moved, to move ourselves and others, within our constituencies and across constituency/racial lines. Maybe the beloved community of which Dr. King spoke is not something we reach some day in the future, but something we experience a little bit every day while we walk and work towards it.

I want to close with an essay just written by a twenty-one-year old Grassroots Leadership staff member, Megan Quattlebaum, a native white Southerner. She has not yet read *The Miner's Canary*. But to the extent that her attitudes and insights are shared by others now coming of age politically in the South and in this country, whether they are twenty-one or eighty-one, something deeply important is happening. We need to pay attention. We need to keep our eyes on the prize.

*Paul and Silas bound in jail
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on, hold on
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on, hold on*

*Paul and Silas began to shout
The jail doors opened and they walked out
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on*

3. Si Kahn, *Multiracial Organizations*, 77 LIBERAL EDUC. 35, 36 (1991) (emphasis added).

NEW ALLIES FOR A NEW FREEDOM MOVEMENT

MEGAN QUATTLEBAUM⁴

I am never and always ashamed to be a Southerner. When people ask me questions about growing up in the South, I am forced to search vainly for words to express my personal paradox: I consider myself to be very/not-at-all "southern." I would like/not like to settle in the South. I feel comfortable/deeply foreign in my hometown. Don't get me wrong: it's not that I'm ambivalent. I checked in the dictionary and ambivalent refers very specifically to an individual who is undecided. I have decided on two opposite but equally powerful states of mind. I accept the contradiction.

Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha advocated a bunch of complicated, contradictory new approaches to studying cultures and societies of which I remember the following: Cultures are best studied on their margins. What he means by this is that a culture is best analyzed not through a study of the homogeneous majority, but rather a study of the small dissenting minorities on the fringes of the society. His approach makes sense to me. After all, we know well that majorities are rarely forced into critical self-analysis. This sort of thought process is conducted by minority groups who, in most cases, stand only to gain through a change in the status quo.

"Yes, yes, cultural theory blah blah blah," you say, "what does this have to do with the bit about being a Southerner?" Ah, yes. Herein, I think, lies the explanation for my contradictory (not ambivalent, mind you) relationship with the South and my Southern heritage. I am a Southerner, I am white, I am a woman, and I am an activist for social and economic justice. As such, I find myself in the deeply paradoxical position of having characteristics of both Bhabha's majority *and* his minority. I am both oppressed and oppressor, a case which, perhaps, is not as rare as we might think.

How, you ask, does a white, Southern woman become a radical activist for social and economic justice? (It's true that this was not one of the avenues suggested to me by my high school guidance counselor.) The same question recently was put to my mother by a family friend. My mother, as the story goes, became visibly offended and replied, "Well, I may not march in the streets, but I do really care about people." I think this represents half of the answer to the question. My mother has always been deeply involved in our church, and she sees her primary contribution to a better world as being a commitment to service. She uses her skills as a speech pathologist to treat low-income, mentally and physically challenged children, though she has been offered much better pay to work with wealthier families. She contributes regularly to the church and other charitable organizations and frequently participates in community service projects. Though hers is a different path than the one I have chosen, her

4. Director, Education Not Incarceration Project, Grassroots Leadership.

commitment to service greatly influenced my desire to use my skills to make a difference. What I love about my mother is her goodness and generosity of spirit.

The outrage and the struggle I learned from my father. Unlike most folks today, he's spent all of his adult life working with one company, the United Parcel Service (UPS). Unlike most Southerners, he's also spent all of his adult life with a union, the Teamsters. As a staunch and vocal unionist in a state renowned for its unfriendliness toward labor, my father has faced consistent persecution in the workplace. And as someone who worked for much needed reforms inside his union, he found little support from his ostensible allies.

The union hall was one of my favorite places to play as a child. I would sit in the copious, leather president's chair in the large meeting room and would bang on his gavel often to call to order the rowdy meetings of my imagination. I was too young to understand the dedication my father exhibited with his willingness to work for the union in addition to his regular sixty-five to seventy hour work week. But even then I picked up on his defiance, his determination, and his hope. What I love about my father is that he is brave, that he continues to work for what he believes to be right, though it is often an uphill battle.

What I like about labor is that it politicizes the personal. When a part-time worker cannot afford to go to the dentist because her job does not provide her with dental insurance, it's political. It is not at all surprising that a union was one of the first political advocacy organizations I worked with when I began making steps into my own political career.

I now think that the American labor movement needs to evolve to become more of an advocate for the non-working poor, for pink-collar, professional, and service workers and workers in the informal sector, for women and minorities and other traditionally excluded groups. I think that the movement will surely perish if it cannot forge real alliances with unionists internationally and particularly in the developing world.

Mixed in with my mother's commitment to service and my father's example of daring defiance is my personal education. I now believe and fight for quite a few things outside the range of what was handed down to me from my parents. I criticize the ruling majority more sharply and feel less a part of it. But I have never stopped respecting my parents for the solid foundation and freedom they have given me to explore my limits.

One of our tasks at Grassroots Leadership is to engage Southern whites in a modern day black-led freedom movement. The challenge is to find a role whites can be proud of in a movement led by people of color. We must help young European Americans see their involvement in the movement as imperative. If each of us does not risk self-analysis and self-criticism, we risk involvement in the unthinking majority. If we continue to benefit from an unjust system, we are a very real part of its maintenance.

The challenge for young white women like myself is to lift our voices fearlessly in struggle, though our education has perhaps taught us to do otherwise. I know my background to be unique for a Southern woman in that my budding activism was nurtured by not just one but both of my parents.

Women's historical involvement in the black freedom movement has been complex. Men have not always been ready to invite white women or women of color into the fold, and even less frequently have they allowed themselves to be led by women. As Kathleen Cleaver said of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, "No one ever asks what a man's place in the revolution is." Yet women's participation always has been permitted reluctantly, and frequently been contingent on women proving that they can act, in a word, manly. I have found that involvement in these struggles has helped me make a great leap forward in my personal process of internal emancipation. When I and other women no longer question our right and obligation to be a part of this struggle, a great step forward will have been made.

I see great advantages in focusing our work heavily on youth. There may be the potential for a certain amount of bias here, given that I am a young person myself. Yet much like women, we as youth have the potential to overthrow many negative images of our community by our participation in this struggle. Popular culture feeds us endless stereotypes about youth, which vary from the angry, apathetic, socially dysfunctional preteen to the flighty, irresponsible, image-obsessed high school and college student. Like most stereotypes, they tend to contain both grains of truth and elements of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Youth see these images of themselves and they become them.

I have spent most of my early adulthood trying to defy these negative stereotypes. Now it is my privilege to be able to help other young people do the same. I hope to see the community of youth provided with outlets and encouragement to take up unified struggles against the social and economic injustices that threaten our generation. I hope to see a respect for their energy and fresh perspectives replace the low expectations our society has learned to have for its young people. After all, it is in them and through them that we see our greatest hope for the fulfillment of our most precious ideals.

The challenges set up here are daunting, but so are the opportunities for creative problem solving and deep, unforgettable learning experiences. If our vision is an end to all institutionalized racism, we had better get started as soon as possible.

LETTING THE CANARY LEAD: POWER AND PARTICIPATION AMONG LATINA/O IMMIGRANT WORKERS

SARU JAYARAMAN*

I. THE COMPLEXITY OF POWER-WITH

Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres's description of "power-with"⁵ matches several of the basic tenets of leadership development in organizing philosophy. Perhaps the most crucial of these tenets is that the leadership of an affected community of color be intimately involved in a struggle that primarily impacts them but affects others as well. As Guinier and Torres describe, the benefits of having such community members actually *lead* the struggle are thousand-fold. Members know the struggle better than anyone else and are more motivated to fight it. Members are the best motivators, organizers, and recruiters; they know the community, its political landscape, and its human assets better than anyone. Most importantly, only if members lead their own struggle will the struggle continue long after the outsiders (often white, often professionals—organizers and lawyers) leave. But "power-with" is not the easy task of simply putting such individuals on a board or in the front of the room in a meeting. It involves a long, complex process of leadership development, politicization, and continual reassessment by the members themselves of the power dynamics within the institution.

When I arrived at the Workplace Project as a law student extern, I was asked by a few staff members to study new models of combining law and organizing so that the organization could better meet its mission of organizing Latina/o immigrant workers for better working conditions. Its existing model of providing legal services in a traditional legal clinic setting as a way of attracting new members into the ongoing organizing campaigns confronted three major problems. First, the workers had grown increasingly dependent on the lawyers to solve their problems. Second, workers were isolated from other workers in resolving their cases, both in their own workplace and in the organization.

* An Adjunct Professor at Brooklyn College and the Queens College Worker Extension Center, Saru Jayaraman is a graduate of Yale Law School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government. For the last two years she served as an attorney/organizer at the Workplace Project, a Latina/o immigrant workers rights center. Saru helped the Workplace Project create and develop La Alianza Para La Justicia (The Alliance for Justice), a law and organizing program that organizes workers in several different industries to advocate on their own behalf in groups using law and organizing strategies. Prior to her work at the Workplace Project she co-founded Women and Youth Supporting Each other (WYSE), a national nonprofit organization which provides young women of color with the critical thinking skills to make responsible decisions about their futures.

5. GUINIER & TORRES, *supra* note 1, at 140-47.

Finally, the clinic, while an extreme drain on resources, was not ultimately contributing to the organizing efforts; workers would often receive their legal services, perhaps take the workers' rights course, and leave. My study of other models brought us to the conclusion that more group problem solving was necessary.

This realization ultimately led to the development of La Alianza Para La Justicia, a new law and organizing model in which we eliminated the legal clinic and its problematic lawyer-client relationship altogether, and instituted an entirely new process of member entry. In this model, workers entering the Workplace Project for the first time would attend a group workshop in which they would share their particular workplace legal problem with other workers, learn about their rights, and be invited to join an industry team. They were told openly about the problems we had with the previous model and the need for workers to solve problems for themselves, collectively, without depending on lawyers. They joined teams that were comprised of workers from the same industry, volunteers, students, and an attorney/organizer. All worked together over a period of time to strategize and act on each of the workplace problems represented by the team members, using both organizing and legal strategies. Some of these actions grew into larger and longer campaigns, with workers from different workplaces offering one another mutual support that they might not have found in their workplaces or unions.

Using this new model, we developed three teams that launched several successful (and some unsuccessful) campaigns. More importantly, we doubled the number of members who stayed active with the Workplace Project over the course of a year. To several of the worker leaders and me, this increase in membership activity became just as, if not more important than, victories against particular exploitative employers—a testament to Guinier and Torres's statement that a good, democratic process will change and expand the desired outcomes. Although the model had room for further development, its greatest achievement was the transformation of community members from workers demanding legal assistance to leaders of teams who were advocates for themselves and other workers.

But herein lies the complexity of "power-with." The success of La Alianza was not merely due to the placement of these individuals into leadership positions: The success was due to the development of the consciousness and capacity of each of these individuals to truly redefine those positions on their terms. For example, I did not feel that leadership development had been achieved when workers starting running team meetings, but rather when they began to evaluate and assess for themselves the progress of their team, where it was heading, what new campaigns needed development, and how to make the team larger and more powerful. Most importantly, true leadership development did not really begin to occur until, after successes and failures, team leaders (immigrant workers) began to assess the power of the team in the context of their industry and society at large, and to think about the possibility of launching

much more widespread campaigns. What was spectacular to me about this development was the fact that such thought processes had always previously been guided, to a large extent, by staff organizers.

To me, this more complex concept of leadership and power sharing is important to the idea of political race. True leadership by the canary must involve not simply the leadership of the most educated and articulate members of communities of color, or the placement of affected community members in leadership positions, but also a process of politicization and consciousness-raising about the dimensions of power—including race, in the traditional sense. Guinier and Torres use the Workplace Project's immigrant worker board as an example of "power-with"—the placement of immigrant workers in leadership positions over the operations of the organization, thus in a position to lead the struggle. Without politicization about race or "power-with" or the importance of grassroots leadership, however, this immigrant worker-run board has often reflected in its democratic process many of the same illnesses Guinier and Torres diagnose of our larger democracy. Latina/o immigrant worker board members have often reflected some of the same biases toward the educated and the privileged in their own decision making that they see in mainstream society. This board was resistant to the idea of workers learning to resolve problems on their own, without relying on a lawyer.

La Alianza was developed and implemented with a year-long struggle to convince board and staff that workers, in fact, were capable of advocating for themselves and one another without a lawyer leading the charge. Despite the consensus that the legal clinic was not working, some board members, because of their reverence for lawyers, never could accept that a new model was replacing the clinic until long after it proved somewhat successful. Similarly, because of internalized racism and classism and a lack of politicization, or at least critical discussion around race in a traditional sense, the board consistently favored white professionals as staff and consultants, and never truly identified with the struggles of other communities of color.

What I find most exciting, and most absent in Guinier and Torres's concept of political race, is the possibility of identifying common struggles among communities of color. Guinier and Torres continually speak of the potential for multiracial organizing in a way that urges the leadership of communities of color to convey their struggle so that white people will identify with it and follow. This conception seemingly ignores the possibility that other communities of color might also identify with their struggle and serve as even more powerful allies. After all, black and white does not really reflect the reality of communities, and certainly not of workplaces, in 2002.

The custodial workers' team that we developed at the Workplace Project was lovingly named L.O.V.E.L.I. (Limpiadores Organizados Venceremos En Long Island—Cleaning Workers United Will Succeed in Long Island), and included several Latino custodial workers, all of which were members of a large

New York service workers' local. Members of this union had been complaining to the Workplace Project for years about the union representatives' lack of responsiveness to their workplace complaints. The old legal clinic would handle these complaints individually, prodding union representatives into listening to their members. In the new model, when one union member came to the Workplace Project complaining of an abusive, discriminatory supervisor and the unresponsiveness of the union, he was encouraged to form of a team of his coworkers to address the problem. Together, these workers formed L.O.V.E.L.I., and decided to not simply resolve immediate problems, but to launch a campaign to remove the abusive supervisor and democratize the Long Island district of their union.

L.O.V.E.L.I. fought a year-long struggle, using organizing tactics (meetings, letters, press, marches, and protests) and a federal lawsuit, that resulted in complete success: The Long Island district of the union was completely overhauled, a new business representative was hired, and the supervisor transferred into oblivion. All of the workers who had lost their jobs to this abusive supervisor in retaliation for organizing were reinstated. The campaign was thus a partial victory and a real testament to the power of the team concept. (The legal clinic of old had dealt with complaints about this union for seven years and had never achieved even a portion of the success L.O.V.E.L.I. achieved in just one year—a union will always respond more quickly to a noisy group of its own members' demands than to those of an outside lawyer.)

But the campaign was not a complete success. The L.O.V.E.L.I. workers cleaned the offices of Newsday, Long Island's largest newspaper, where the custodial staff was partly Latina/o but mostly Haitian. Throughout its yearlong campaign, L.O.V.E.L.I. struggled to recruit Haitian members with letters, phone calls, workplace visits, and home visits. At one point, they even drew upon the talents of a Haitian-American law student who spoke both Spanish and Creole. But not a single Haitian worker attended a meeting. It was not until after L.O.V.E.L.I. finally managed to overhaul the union's district office and remove the abusive supervisor that a leader among the Haitian workers finally attended a few meetings. Although L.O.V.E.L.I. had managed to present its struggle in such a way as to attract the support of a number of community allies, mostly students and lawyers, thus perhaps fitting Guinier and Torres's definition of political race, it did not succeed in bringing the two worker communities together. This was due in large part to the fact that the Workplace Project's commitment and mission was to organize the Latina/o immigrant worker community, not the workplace. The board and staff had not been politicized to understand how critical it is to identify its struggle with that of other communities of color. The solution might not be to change the mission to suit the reality of the workplace, but to make a more concerted effort to interest existing Haitian organizations, for example, in simultaneously organizing in the Newsday offices, to create a coordinated effort.

Guinier and Torres rightly emphasize the importance of “safe” spaces in which communities can congregate by ethnicity, and they point to the ways in which the white and black communities organized separately and together in the K-mart distributor unionizing example in North Carolina. The same emphasis and result could occur—and be more powerful—when organizing several different communities of color. Of course any number of other unions, worker centers, and movements have successfully organized workplaces with different ethnicities; the point here is not that such a feat has never been done, only that it is more difficult and complex, but ultimately more powerful and more reflective of reality, than the type of multiracial organizing that focuses on a community of color leading a struggle with which white allies ultimately identify and follow. Creating alliances between different communities of color directly destroys the “hierarchy of oppression” that threatens to divide minority communities in a way that simply drawing upon white allies and supporters does not. Thus, multiracial organizing between different communities of color has more potential for systemic change.

II. THE POTENTIAL OF THE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY PROJECT

Guinier and Torres’s chapter on participatory democracy resonated deeply with me. I have always felt that our nation, with its embarrassingly low voter turnout rates, rampant apathy, and corporate-controlled media, could not call itself a democracy as long as individuals did not truly participate in any process. Now as a college professor, I see the urgency and potential of participatory democracy more clearly than ever before. And yet I do not see any potential for change unless the populace is not only introduced to new ways to participate, *but also actually is involved in the dialogue about why participation does not occur*. In other words, the most interesting and useful outcome of *The Miner’s Canary* in my mind would be a Freireian discussion with the nation around Chapter 6 of the book.

I think my undergraduate political science class this past fall at Brooklyn College—“People, Power, and Politics”—is a good vehicle for examining the potential of such popular engagement. The father of popular education, Paulo Freire, criticized traditional educational pedagogy as following the ‘banking concept,’ in which educators ‘deposit’ education into receptacle-like students without engaging them in critical thinking or valuing their experiences. Freire believed classrooms should involve a dialogue between educators and students. Like Freire, I see my classroom as a microcosm of our American democracy. More than the immigrant worker communities with which I have organized, this classroom represented a challenge of engaging in dialogue with all parts of the political and racial spectrum. The students were mostly young, mostly working-class, about half white and half representative of Brooklyn’s diverse African American and immigrant populations, and almost 100% politically uninvolved when they entered my class. We began with an examination of Steven Lukes’s

treatise on power,⁶ which describes three dimensions of power relationships. In a nutshell, Lukes's first dimension is simple, traditional authority; the second dimension is the power to put issues on the agenda; and the third is the power to actually influence or affect public opinion, as the media so often does. In our class, we discussed our power as citizens to vote for candidates (the first dimension) as an illusion of power—in truth, elites have the second and third dimensions of power. They set the agenda and decide on the issues that truly interest and affect the larger populace.

At this stage, students, particularly the first-year students fresh out of high school, were resistant, unwilling to criticize American democracy or the ways in which capitalism controls that third dimension of power, public opinion, through the media. Over the course of the semester, we used popular education techniques—games, activities, and group discussion—to analyze critically: 1) power differentials—race, class, gender; 2) ways in which power is maintained—our backward-looking Constitution, globalization, Freire's banking concept of education; and 3) ways in which the powerless have historically organized and continue to organize for "power-with." In this last section on social movements, both historical and current, I brought in modern-day organizers from nine different organizations to lead discussions with the students about their work.

By the end of the semester even the most resistant students had to admit that there must be more to democracy and their roles in a democracy, if only based on the fact that they had participated in my classroom in ways that they had never participated in their own education before. And since we studied Freire in the middle of our semester, making it clear that the classroom can be viewed a microcosm of power dynamics in society at large, the students were forced to think about whether the new ways they had participated in my classroom might not represent new ways to participate in democracy. At the end of the semester, we discussed that openly as well.

The students realized that there must be more to democracy and they had learned from the section on social movements about different ways to participate, so we questioned together why they themselves do not participate more fully. A few, in fact, did choose to participate differently by the end of the semester—three students informed me that they were getting involved with the organizations introduced to them in class. But the vast majority left the last class session of the semester simply ruminating. They had been made aware of the intermediate institutions that Guinier and Torres discuss—the organizations, churches, coalitions, efforts—with which they could get involved, and the ways in which, by not doing so, they allow elites to aggregate even more power. *Yet they still remained completely stationary.* They were scared, they said, or too busy. If these young, energetic students, with more time on their hands and less

6. See STEVEN LUKES, *POWER: A RADICAL VIEW* (1974).

to lose than their adult counterparts, do not realize, through dialectic, oppositional dialogue, the urgency of their participation beyond voting, I questioned, what hope is there for the rest of America?

Nevertheless, reading their final exams gave me some hope. The students may not all have joined an intermediate institution, but they certainly had learned to think critically—some fiercely so—about the limits of our democratic state, our capitalist corporate-controlled media, and the danger of the constant, uninhibited expansion of multinational corporate power. They received a new lens on participatory democracy, and in some ways, I realize, had already begun to participate differently by questioning the status quo aloud. Thinking back on our discussion of why they do not participate, I remember that actually, the answer that resonated with the majority of the classroom was that they, as yet, did not know enough about the issues we discussed in my class to participate. The project in participatory democracy must continue. I hope that now that they have learned to discuss the issues collectively, they will continue to do so. I am also continuing the project by teaching the same class elsewhere next semester, and I know I can draw upon a number of the exercises we used for critical analysis in my work with immigrant workers.

III. LEADERSHIP BY THE CANARY

One of the most interesting class sessions this semester was a day on which various immigrant worker centers came to speak to the class about their organizing efforts. One of the centers was represented by some of their immigrant worker members. This is a common practice among worker centers—when invited to speak at a college or university, have the worker members speak for the organization, both as a leadership development opportunity for the workers and because the students can learn from no one better than the workers themselves. To me, this might just represent the most transformative possibility, a combination of “power-with” and the project in participatory democracy: Canary community members leading discussions with the miner—mainstream America—about the limits of our democracy, why our participation has been limited, and the ways that our participation can change in order that we might save democracy, as Guinier and Torres say, or perhaps create a new democracy that America has never seen before.

TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

NAOKA CAREY*

The struggle to liberate the democratic imagination is not new. Scores of writers and theoreticians have informed us that the sense of agency and interdependence that grows out of collective action can transform individuals and societies, and even make the promise of a diverse and engaged democratic citizenry a reality.⁷ More importantly, those of us who have been active in community struggles have come to understand the reality of those transformations on a personal level. We know that they can be difficult. We know that they are complicated, particularly when we attempt to bring together people who do not share a common history or culture. We know, either explicitly or implicitly, that truly imaginative social change requires both action and critical reflection. The challenge comes not in knowing these things, but *living* them, and understanding how to make them into our reality: repeatedly, daily, and unambiguously.

When I first considered Professors Guinier and Torres's chapter on enlisting race to resist hierarchy, I was frustrated. The discussion of the organization and political awakening of the K-Mart workers in Greensboro was inspiring, but parts of the story were missing: How and why did the organizing effort begin? Was it self-generating or in part the work of organizers from outside the community? How and why were the members of the "larger community,"

* Naoka Carey is a third-year law student and an Article Selection Editor for the N.Y.U. Review of Law & Social Change. Before coming to law school, she worked at Seattle Youth Involvement Network in Seattle, collaborating with youth to address issues including police-youth relations, bias and harassment in schools, and the particular needs of runaway and homeless youth. She subsequently returned to her hometown of Boston to work for the Massachusetts Prevention Center, a youth advocacy organization that focuses on substance abuse and violence prevention. In 1999, she received a Master's Degree in Education, focusing in Adolescent Risk and Prevention. As part of her studies she researched issues surrounding parent and community involvement in schools, specifically focusing on the impact of bussing and desegregation on parental involvement in Boston public schools. While in law school, she has worked for Advocates for Children and the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division in New York, The Children's Law Center in Washington, D.C., and Legal Services for Children in San Francisco.

7. See, e.g., JOHN DEWEY, *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION* 87 (Free Press, 1966) (1916) ("A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associational living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the numbers of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity"); PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., Twentieth Anniversary ed. 1998) (1970); BELL HOOKS, *YEARNING: RACE, GENDER AND CULTURAL POLITICS* (1990); BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM* (1994). See also ANDREA NYE, *PHILOSOPHIA* 195-205 (1994), a feminist reading of Hannah Arendt's political theory which identifies the importance of collective speech and action and the opportunities they offer for oppressed groups.

particularly the white workers who eventually joined the movement, transformed? Where were the organizers in the story and what were their experiences of transformation? What about the lawyers involved who, after all, retained the privilege of speaking with authority on behalf of, not just beside, the workers of Greensboro—were they really comfortable with relinquishing the “power-over” that comes with their professional identity?

In my effort to understand *how* successful collective action really worked in Greensboro, I began by considering what I knew about organizing efforts surrounding school reform, an area I have been exposed to as both an advocate and a researcher. Two organizing campaigns in particular stood out, both of which involved efforts to make traditionally poor and, in at least one case, segregated schools more equitable, diverse, and effective places of learning. The first took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the late '70s, where organizers, operating in the shadow of Boston's painful history of violent resistance to bussing, attempted to find a method of desegregation that did not involve a war over, in the words of Professors Torres and Guinier, “an already baked pie.”⁸ The other is the school reform work of the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas in the '80s and '90s, which united faith-based organizations, schools, and communities in an attempt to address severely underperforming schools.⁹ Both efforts were confronting traditionally divided communities. In Cambridge, organizers focused on bridging gaps between parents from different racial backgrounds. In Texas, the challenge was to unite parents, who often felt little connection to the schools, with teaching professionals, who were used to doing their jobs without or in spite of parent involvement.

In both Cambridge and Texas, the initial organizing strategy focused not on protests, public meetings or workshops, but on relationship-building. Organizers from both within and outside of the community joined parents and teachers to go door-to-door and conduct living room meetings. Small groups of people not only met each other for the first time, but discovered that they shared concerns about their schools and children that did not always transcend, but often mitigated, their differences. Plans were developed to improve the schools and to increase cooperation between the schools and the community. The people involved gradually discovered the power of action, but not before discovering the potential in their relationships with one another—something which I imagine, but do not know, the workers in Greensboro also discovered.

8. My discussion of the school desegregation process in Cambridge is based on conversations with members of the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) in Boston, Mass., a national school-reform organization whose first major project was, in the words of former Superintendent of Cambridge Schools Bill Lannan, to “prevent another ‘Boston Massacre.’”

9. For further discussion of the organizing efforts in Texas, see MARY BETH ROGERS, *COLD ANGER: A STORY OF FAITH AND POWER POLITICS* (1990); DENNIS SHIRLEY, *COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR URBAN SCHOOL REFORM* (1997).

In Cambridge and in Texas, the relationships that developed between community members and school officials allowed efforts to be sustained over years, even after the "professionals" had moved on to other projects. The relationships encouraged the development of systems of accountability between the schools involved and parents, systems which persist in some form to this day. I am not suggesting that these efforts were perfect. Although both the Cambridge schools and some of the IAF's Texas schools made great improvements in community building and educational performance, these communities continue to face considerable challenges, both in furthering educational achievement and in addressing racism. What I am suggesting is that without relational organizing, both within and across different communities, any changes made are shallow at best.

Relational organizing is not easy. It requires trust, which must be earned slowly, and sometimes painfully. For those who are seeking to facilitate change in particular communities, whether they be Septima Clark or Uri Treisman, trust is earned in part by a willingness to refuse to see a bright line between those who organize and those who are organized, between the educator and the educated. As Paulo Freire, writing over twenty years ago, warned, "those who authentically commit themselves to the people must reexamine themselves constantly To affirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be given to (or imposed on) the people—is to retain the old ways."¹⁰ Freire's words sound simple, but it can be incredibly challenging, particularly for advocates steeped in assumptions about professionalism and specialization, to facilitate change that renders their skills unnecessary or out-of-date and requires them to view their role in new ways.

When I worked in Boston, I facilitated a young women's theater project, the goal of which was to create an opportunity for teens to educate their peers about substance abuse and violence. Every week, I met with the participants for trainings and to plan our outreach strategy, but I repeatedly explained to them that it was their show—they were in charge of the agenda. Every so often, as I was explaining a particular concept or issue, one of the young women—I'll call her Zora—would begin to pantomime my speech, making me self-conscious and sometimes irritated. I could not figure out why Zora, who I generally had a good relationship with, insisted on behaving in this juvenile and, I thought, distracting way. One day, as she again was impersonating me, it dawned on me that I had been using what I call my "social worker" voice—the patronizing but concerned tone of the adult who knows what's best. I realized that, indirectly and maybe not quite consciously, Zora had been trying to tell me that *I* was the one who was being irritating, not to mention hypocritical, by failing to live up to all my youth "empowerment" rhetoric.

10. FREIRE, *supra* note 7, at 42–43.

This experience reminds me regularly of the importance of being observant and genuine in our relationships, particularly when the goal is to shift long-standing power hierarchies. It is not enough to acknowledge, as Professors Guinier and Torres do, that initial “power-over” players—organizers, advocates, and others—must “yield their zero-sum authority in exchange for true power-sharing arrangements.”¹¹ Getting from enclaves resisting hierarchy to broad social change requires more than an exhortation to those with authority to *appreciate* the benefits of a “power-with” approach. It requires the humility to constantly recognize that social change requires personal transformation, not just of the underprivileged but of the privileged. It requires those of us who are used to holding power, and those of us who are not, to constantly reconsider and restructure our relationship to it. And it requires that we take seriously a commitment to consider multiple experiences of marginalization and power simultaneously, so that we are not reduced to using one lens—whether it be race, gender, class, or any other category—to interpret the whole of society. Our ability to use multiple lenses is enhanced in turn by our willingness to be in genuine relationships that transgress and recognize our differences, relationships that allow us to appreciate how the realities that other people live are different and similar to our own, relationships where we accept accountability for ourselves and our actions. If the organizing and action we do is rooted in relationship and reflection, accountability is not merely a buzzword, it is the foundation of the group’s power.

11. GUINIER & TORRES, *supra* note 1, at 147.

A POLITICAL CONCEPTION OF RACIAL JUSTICE

KENDALL THOMAS*

Good afternoon. We're all here in this room having conversations that some of us may not have had before and I think in doing that, the Review of Law and Social Change has reminded us of something that we all surely know—that theory and practice inhabit the same space and that activism, which is aimed at the root transformation of our society, demands continual reflection, continual thought, continual conversation; that effective activism is critical activism.

I want to return to two questions Marshall Ganz raised this morning. For those of you who weren't here, the first question Professor Ganz put to us was whether there can be a just politics without reference to race. And the second question was whether racial politics can be achieved without reference to power. The lesson I take from my reading of *The Miner's Canary* is an emphatic "No" on both counts. This is a core insight behind the concept of political race around which Professors Guinier and Torres organize their argument. *The Miner's Canary* advances what, in my own work, I've more clumsily called "the political conception of racial justice." As Lani and Gerald note in their book, the political conception rejects the notion that questions of race and racism and racial justice are essentially moral questions that require a moral solution. As a normative matter, the moral model of racial justice focuses on the immorality of what it frames as racial discrimination and mounts its case against racism in essentially moral terms; racism at base is a failure to recognize the equal moral personhood of individuals and social groups. For the racial moralist, racism's elimination simply requires the correction of this moral error and the achievement of a moral consensus around the moral principle on matters of race. I would cite as one example of this position—a very sophisticated example to be sure—N.Y.U. Law School's own Ronald Dworkin. Indeed, for racial moralists, the goal of racial justice is to build a firewall between race on the one hand and politics on the other. I believe that racial moralism has become the dominant grammar in American law and politics. And I think that's been bad both for American law and for American politics.

* Edited transcription of spoken remarks from symposium at New York University School of Law, Feb. 1, 2002. Kendall Thomas is Professor of Law at Columbia University in the City of New York, where he has taught constitutional law, communications law, legal philosophy, feminist legal theory, human rights, Critical Race Theory and Law and Sexuality. Professor Thomas is a founder and Co-Director of the Columbia University Center for the Study of Law and Culture. He has been a Visiting Professor at Stanford Law School, and for several years, Visiting Professor in American Studies and Afro-American Studies at Princeton University. Professor Thomas has taught or lectured in France, the Netherlands, England, Germany, Haiti and South Africa. A founding member of the Majority Action Caucus of ACT-UP, Sex Panic! and the AIDS Prevention Action League, Thomas currently serves as Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors of Gay Men's Health Crisis, and chairs its Public Policy and Advocacy Committee.

By contrast, the political conception of racial justice directs its concerns to the intersection of race and power. It's nothing less than a paradigm shift from a moral to a political understanding and a political discourse about and around race. The political understanding of racial justice starts from a candid recognition that the force and persistence of racial hierarchy warrant what Derrick Bell calls "racial realism" about the limits of moralism and moral politics. I'd argue that the moral politics, all of racial moralism, isn't a politics at all but rather a flight from the political. American political society is still in salient and significant ways a racial polity. Rather than seeing racism as the sugar that is illicitly and immorally poured in the gas tank of democracy, the political conception of racial justice sees race/racism as the primary fuel of American democracy—American democracy is racial democracy.

A properly political response to the problem of racial injustice faces a double challenge: First, we have to review the problem of justice in light of the problem of power in politics, and at the same time, and second, re-think the political around the axis of race. So the political model refuses to shirk from the antagonistic dimensions of racial struggle and racial justice seeking. It takes racial politics seriously; that is, it places full accent and emphasis on the power relations, the conflicts, the contestations, the antagonisms, hostilities, the forms of subordination, repression and resistance that make race such a potent force and a potent presence in American life. Its goal is the protections of what I call "vulnerable racial publics," vulnerable racial publics being understood as groupings of racially objected citizens whose civic survival, whose human survival as such, is under threat.

I want to end with two brief observations about what a commitment to the political conception of racial justice means, first, for the way we understand the idea of race, and second, for the way we create and sustain multiracial coalitional activism.

First, I believe that the political conception needs to see race, as I've said many times before, not so much as a noun but as a verb. In this respect, I fully endorse the thesis of Professors Guinier and Torres that political race must break with the reductive vision of identity politics. I don't want to engage in the now fashionable trashing of identity politics because I believe identity politics did important work insofar as its demands for a politics of recognition interrupted the siren call to colorblindness and challenged the simplistic notion that the best way to address issues of race is simply to pretend that race doesn't exist. Nonetheless, as the postmodern critique of essentialism has demonstrated, among other things, an expressive politics rooted in identity is not necessarily a progressive politics. In its crudest form, identity politics is self-combustive. As Guinier and Torres note, identity politics is consumed in a single step.

The central concern of a progressive racial politics for the new century must build on but go beyond identity politics. The crucial goal, it seems to me, is to build a movement that allows us to frame and contest the meanings that are

attached to and assigned to race; in short, to understand that meanings are circulated in racial discourses through and alongside other means such as those attached to gender, to sexuality, to class and the like.

Another point I should make parenthetically about this idea of racial public is that members of racial publics need not belong to the same race or even be citizens. I want to offer an example of coalition politics: the recent passage in New York state of a law privatizing Blue Cross/Blue Shield, a not-for-profit insurer. Governor Pataki was able to get this bill passed in large measure because of the deal—a one billion dollar deal some say—that he struck with 1199, a union which, as Professor Phil Thompson said earlier, is one of the most powerful racial minority organizations in the city, if not the state. It is a multi-racial coalition. And yet, what this example of multiracial coalitional politics seems to have shown are the dangers of a multiracial coalition that restricts itself to a ground of identity. Or of an interest politics dressed up in identity drag.

I would say four things about this deal. First, it pursued a reformist interest group pluralism without launching a more fundamental structural challenge to the way healthcare is delivered in New York state. Second, it made no challenge whatsoever to the assumption of scarcity. It played the power politics game in the most conventional and by-the-numbers way rather than forcing a discussion of opening up the healthcare pie. Third, it got short term benefits for the union members who received three years of salary increases, but those benefits for union members were purchased at the expense of the communities from which the union members come, and whose communities' members depend on the continuing operation of the clinics and hospitals where 1199 members work. That is, some working poor got benefits at the expense of other working and non-working poor. Fourth, this deal seems to me to raise some questions about the abilities of leaders of institutionalized multiracial coalitions to understand their mandate in solidaristic terms, to balance their mandate as representatives of an institution like the union, not so much against, but in relation to and alongside those of the larger community. I think this idea is captured in the book in this notion of "power-with."

So we have to ask, who do these leaders represent, and who, by pursuing a conventional interest group pluralism model of leadership, do they empower? What *The Miner's Canary* challenges us to do is not simply to break with the politics of identity, but also to break with a politics of interest, and to embrace a politics of solidarity. And that has to do not so much with the social location I'm in, but with the future I want to see attached to that meaning, the future meanings I want to see attached to the terms that we call race.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

LANI GUINIER (MODERATOR): This panel was a panel of many voices singing a very similar but complicated tune. And it was a tune that challenges not only conventional ideas about race but conventional ideas about power and specifically conventional ideas about leadership.

Q: One of the panelists made a point that she really didn't care about whether white people were involved in this kind of multiracial movement. I'd like to ask if you were being rhetorical there or if there really is no place for white middle-class folks in this kind of social justice movement.

Q: I work for the Ford Foundation at the moment, and my question is interestingly parallel to that. I thought several people made some interesting points that questioned the assumptions about the possibilities of multiracial movements and complicated those assumptions. Saru, your example of the Haitian workers not being able to build a bridge between Haitians and Latinos. And Si, in your experience at SNCC, what happened to SNCC, within SNCC, around white activists. I'd like to hear your thinking about that and how you deal with the nationalist desires on the part of many of us, to not work cross-racially but with nationalism.

Q: Hi, I'm a third year law student here at N.Y.U. Before I came to N.Y.U., I was a union organizer and activist. My question is mainly to Kendall. I felt both defensive yet compelled to hear your critiques of 1199, and I was wondering if you could talk a little more about the tension between creating an on-the-ground transformative vision and trying to sustain a base. It's my sense, from my very limited experience in trying to do that, that it's profoundly difficult to create and sustain a movement and always be fighting for these larger goals when there are immediate needs that are realistically necessary to maintain a membership in a movement.

SARU JAYARAMAN: My comment about white folks wasn't completely rhetorical—I do think there's a role for white middle-class people. A lot of people who came out and worked with our teams, actually from N.Y.U., were white middle-class people who participated in teams led by immigrant workers. What I meant was that I don't want to spend my energy and faith thinking about, "Will the white people come? Will they follow us? Can we frame things in such a way that they will come?" I believe that if I spend my time building coalitions between different groups of color, there's so much power there that they will come.

Some of the people in the room are involved, as the Workplace Project was, with the coalition called TWW—Third World Within—which is a coalition of

people of color organizations in New York City run by people of color. We have found a lot of solidarity among the groups and there's always been, frankly, too much interest among white people to come to the events and come to the meetings. We think what is really important initially is this space to build between different groups of color and leadership between different groups of color. And then, of course, there's room for white people to come and join. But my energy and time is spent first building that coalition because I think that there is so much power there. And we've been able to overcome those nationalist issues by identifying our nationalism with somebody else's nationalism. To me, the best example of this is the Vieques support campaign which has done a fantastic job of really seeing their struggle identified with the struggles of Palestinians, with the struggles of people in the Philippines, with the struggles of lots of other people. Those folks are some of the most nationalistic people I know but see their struggle in solidarity with others.

SI KAHN: A good organizer can organize anybody, but not necessarily this year, not necessarily this community, not necessarily this issue.

We have a very short historical time frame in this country that we borrow from the dominant society. So we assume that we can go from here to there in a year or two. I would say that the nationalisms of the 1960s made possible the conversations today. I just think it takes forty years. (Laughter.) I mean that very seriously. There are phases of development that you cannot short-circuit. Nationalism is necessary because groups that historically do not have power cannot come to the table in any equitable relationship until they have that power. And nationalism is often a process of going through the development state before you get enough power so that you can say "no" even to your allies.

Any organization can't take as a first principle: here are the allies we must have. It has to say here is the issue which we have to win; here's the campaign that we have to fight, and then go through the strategies chart and say "Okay, is this group with us? If so, how do we frame it?" You go down the list. On the question of whites in somebody else's movement, the issues is the same as anybody else in anybody else's movement. Is it, at this moment, possible, practical? Does it contribute? But the starting point cannot be that they must be in.

Part of what I found fascinating about SNCC was that the work that I did in SNCC was not in black communities. As late as 1965, the African American leadership of SNCC was asking those white organizers who were comfortable in white working class communities to go out and organize those communities because they knew that fifteen to twenty years down the road, they would need white allies. They did not think it was possible in the '60s and I think they were right. But they had the long range vision to build this.

So you lead out by building your own strength and your power, you do an analysis that says who are our allies. They may be other people of color; they

may be white, but it's a practical thing and you go through the stage where you have enough power so that you can confront not only their power but the power of other allies and comrades.

KENDALL THOMAS: On the question of whether white people ought to be involved in multiracial justice struggles, I think the question has to be answered "yes." If for no other reason than their absence from such movements will pose the danger that we continue to reproduce the logic of racial struggle, whereby people who are raced—that is, non-white people—bear the whole burden of racial representation and activism. If politics is about contests over and the testing of claims to democratic legitimacy, white people have as much interest as anybody else in participating in a politics that will protect the rights and integrity of vulnerable racial publics and racially abjected citizens.

On the union question, I would say this: A famous, dead, and, as it happens, white French philosopher named Michel Foucault once talked about something he described as the politics of discomfort. The kind of post-identitarian multiracial coalition politics that I have in mind is by definition a politics of discomfort because people can't hide behind their identity and claim on the basis of that identity some special purchase or insight or ownership of race. Now if union politics is, in its ideal expression, the practice of a multiracial coalitional politics, the tensions between delivering the goods to your members, on the one hand, and trying to get your members excited about a larger social vision that will engage them on something other than the basis of their narrow self-interest is something that people committed to, or who claim to be committed to, progressive politics have tried to negotiate. I fully respect and acknowledge the difficulties of that discomfort, but I do think that a kind of other-regarding solidaristic understanding of the costs and benefits of pursuing a narrow goal that harms a broader racial public is something that a progressive leadership ought to try to reach, and which ought to try to be a part of their agenda.

In the case of 1199, a union which has done great work to be sure, it seems to me that much of the power of that union mobilization has been because it understood its project as being, in significant part, an anti-racist one. The idea of political race, the idea of looking at racial publics in this broad sense, opens up an understanding of what the interests of the union itself are.

NAOKA CAREY: I want to quickly respond to the question of white people in the movement. I think that, particularly for young middle-class white people, it's tricky, because it's cooler to be in the movement than to go back to white racist communities and do anti-racist work there. I think there's this desire to say, "Can't you let us in? Can't we come?" because we don't really want to go back there, because those people are the rednecks that everybody makes fun of. I say that and it sounds kind of silly, but my family comes from the Boston Irish community, which is a notoriously racist community; it's also my community,

and I feel I have to be accountable to that community as well as to other communities in this country. I need to do work there. I don't think that answers the question of the things that you were talking about, but I think its something the cool white progressive kids need to be aware of when they're saying that they want to be part of the movement. It's uncomfortable to go and deal with white racism and white privilege.

Q: I'm from New Haven. I'm with the Blackout Arts Collective. I was listening to Malcolm X the other day and he said the champ will never tell the challenger how to win, so that's how I feel about the whole multiracial thing. Ba-boom! I have to ask: How do you see the concept of race? Do you see it dissipating into nothing or do you see it still supporting live democracy? Do you see it fueling that, or do you see it dissipating into this one collective race of humans, how we wish to be?

Q: Hi, I'm a doctoral student at University of Pennsylvania. I have a question for Professor Thomas. You had mentioned that you see race becoming more political as opposed to moralistic. The question I have strikes at the heart of the title of the panel, which is "Political Race, Faith and the Democratic Process." What do you see as the future of faith-based organizations in the race realm since they marry moralism, race and politics together?

Q: I'm a behaviorist, and I try to deal with actual reality—how people behave day to day. I want us all to start off acknowledging the reality that we live in a multiracial society. My question is, given the current state of the nation, do you think the social justice issues that we're talking about here today will influence our growth from history around these issues? For me, this started at the Civil War. It started when we first were brought here. Not all of us, but a lot of us were first brought here chained, and we still are in chains today. That's the concreteness I'd like to hear something about. What can we do to inspire our government representatives to talk about or do something about the ideals we're here for?

PROFESSOR THOMAS: I didn't really understand the reference to faith in the title of the panel to be talking about religious institutions. I'm not opposed in principle to a role in politics for people who have religious belief or people who are spiritual. I myself belong to that camp. I'm a member of a multiracial Christian congregation, but that congregation is open not just to people of all races but to people of all kinds. And its politics, insofar as it has a pursuit of politics, is a progressive politics. It embraces liberation theology and the proposition that God has an option for the oppressed. That said, there are a lot of reactionary religious institutions, and so, for purposes of politics, I think people who are motivated in politics by religious belief ought to be able to translate

their positions into terms that are publicly accessible to people who aren't religious.

MS. CAREY: I'm responding to the first question. If we're conceiving of race as a political concept that indicates there's oppression going on, then I very, very much hope that kind of understanding of race will have to end because oppression will have to end. But I think that's the transcendental vision, the faith that you have to have about what's going to happen. I don't need to have it happen right now in order for me to keep doing the work that I need to keep doing, though.

MR. KAHN: Keep your eyes on the prize. That's what it's about. Because we as progressives, we as radicals focus so much on the harms, we are terrible about crediting ourselves for the work we've done. In the last fifty years, we've created revolutions in this society. There are things that are worse, but there are many, many things that are better. But the Right never sleeps. Watch the differing reactions to September 11. We took an appropriate moratorium on political action. They went to work and moved an agenda in over us. So I think it's about understanding the power of our own work historically, having a long-range point of view, and then having a faith, based in our historical ability to make change, that change will come again.

MS. JAYARAMAN: Race ain't going nowhere, and I'm so glad it's not because it adds spice. Inequality's going somewhere. It's gonna end—I believe in that—but race isn't, and I'm glad.

PROFESSOR GUINIER: I want to thank the panelists and the audience for this very very exciting exchange. Thank you very much.

