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AGENCY ACTUALIZATION AND ARTISTIC AWAKENING: THE POETIC RHETORIC OF FREEDOM SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the rhetoric of poems written by Freedom School students in Mississippi amidst the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Much of the rhetoric documented, explored, and valued from this era is of adults with the power and means to have their voices heard and respected; however, this paper argues the value of these students’ unique Black experience as one that is underexplored and greatly compelling. The social and political context surrounding the inception of Freedom Schools is discussed, as well as the need for further research and scholarship on the intellectual activity and rhetorical artifacts of the students of these schools.

Introduction

Although the sentiment “history is told by the victors” often rings true, it is perhaps more accurate to state that history is told by those with the social, political, and economic power and means to write it and manipulate it, effectively drowning out any conflicting accounts. When the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is viewed, it is evident that loud White voices of both then and now attempt to divert the focus of the movement in such a way that Black voices, history, culture, and figures are often lost or forgotten. Some seemingly forgotten voices are those of Black students in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. These students were young, but through the teachings they received at Freedom Schools and the poetry they wrote over the course of that sweltering summer, they became agents of social change and storytellers of their unique Black experience. While much of the history and scholarship regarding the Civil Rights Movement and its respective rhetoric focuses on the works of adult activists, this essay is chiefly concerned with the rhetoric of children and adolescents who grew up amidst this movement and argues that their poetical work and rhetorical goals offer a novel lens through which to view the Civil Rights Movement and its effects—specifically the artistic and agentive effects on the students of Freedom Schools. Note that although in recent decades there has been an increase in the scholarship on Freedom Schools and youth involvement in the Civil
Rights Movement, this paper suggests substantial scholarly interest in the intellectual activity that emerged from Freedom Schools is still lacking, and it seeks to remedy that through the discussion and analysis of the poetry of Freedom School students.

The Need for Freedom Schools

In order to have an informed and meaningful conversation regarding Freedom School poetry, understanding the need for Freedom Schools in the state of Mississippi is vital. Mississippi was an “unflinchingly segregated” state, and White Mississippians of the 20th century had opinions on Black education. In the Greenwood Commonwealth, a newspaper of the Mississippi Delta, it was stated, “Their education only spoils a good field hand and makes a shyster lawyer or a fourth-rate teacher. It is money thrown away” (Cobb 107). Although this rhetoric is abhorrent and dismissive of any and all potential of Black individuals, this, of course, was hardly the worst of what would come.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped to organize what would soon be called Freedom Summer, which originally sought to make progress for mass voter rights and antidiscrimination efforts but was also a perfect setting in which to incorporate Freedom Schools (Etienne 450). Unfortunately, in response to the Freedom Summer activities of the SNCC in Mississippi,

between June and September 1964… local police and segregationists murdered three freedom workers, violently assaulted over eighty activists, shot at activists or their homes over thirty-five times, arrested over a thousand workers, burned thirty-five churches, and firebombed thirty-one homes and freedom houses that housed the summer volunteers. (Hale 330)

Never shocking, though consistently disappointing, it was clear that Black individuals in the state of Mississippi were perceived as unequal, less valuable, and economically disadvantageous, and the state’s lack of investment in their education was a clear indication of these beliefs. In 1964, the state of Mississippi spent an insulting 76 cents per capita on Black students while allocating $30.89 per capita to their white counterparts (Hale 107). Fund allocation with such disparity served to keep the Black community undereducated—an undereducation which was both method and excuse for the denial of their political rights (Etienne 456). Even a year after the Freedom Summer, Black students and children were still so underserved in Mississippi that the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America intervened alongside the Office of Economic Opportunity on the Head Start program, which sought to “prepare disadvantaged children for first grade” (Sanders). When Black students were able to attend school, however, they were often “taught to be subservient agricultural labors and nothing else”; school principals would even “rent out” Black students to work the cotton fields (Etienne 455). Students’ unwilling tie to
the plight of their ancestors hindered both social and political progress while reinstating a form of slavery (Etienne 455). To combat the effects of the Jim Crow laws, widespread segregationist beliefs, and violent hate crimes, Freedom Schools emerged to educate Black youth but also, most importantly, to “expos[e] them to their own importance in the fight for social change” (Etienne 451).

In order to reveal to students their own worth, power, and importance in society and in bettering sociopolitical issues, an enumerated statement of these schools’ purpose and goals was essential. The informational memorandum written by movement veterans stated,

[T]he purpose of the Freedom School is to help [students] begin to question… [and] to provide an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and, ultimately, new directions for action. (Hale 331)

This new opportunity to challenge, question, and discuss amongst peers and seasoned movement veterans created the backdrop for and fostered the ideas of Freedom School poets and activists. Certain subjects taught in Freedom Schools likely also played an integral creative role in the inspiration and composition of Freedom School poetry: “Freedom School students also studied African American history and literature, which were not part of the regular public school curriculum.… The Freedom School teachers taught and assigned authors who articulated what it meant to be African American in the United States” (Hale 332). The curriculum of Freedom Schools (called the citizenship curriculum) comprised seven units of study, including “the analysis of the ‘power structure’ in American society and its impact on African Americans and poor whites; a critique of ‘materialism’ in a unit devoted to ‘material things versus soul things’… [and] other issues were addressed, including leadership development, events in the contemporary freedom struggle, and extracurricular activities” (Hale 332).

While the intention of Freedom Schools was to educate and prepare Black youth to be active participants in American democracy, the frequent discussion of their own place in the difficult conversations of race and inequality in the United States allowed students the opportunity to become cognizant of the power structures at play that actively sought to hinder them from political strength and greatness. This cognizance, and subsequent righteous frustration, lit the proverbial flame for Freedom School students, especially those who authored poems. Though many schools had differing daily schedules—often due to rural areas needing night schools for laboring students—all Freedom Schools included seminars on nonviolence, which “would often [lead] to the activities the students would engage in during the evenings and weekends around the right to vote” (Etienne 457). Education was the means by which the Black community would gain necessary political power; however, it was
vital that Freedom Schools not simply teach core curriculum. For sustained change to occur, these adolescent students’ involvement in their own political livelihoods was paramount.

Freedom School Poetry

An avenue through which some students of Freedom Schools began to exercise this involvement in the political sphere was through rhetoric—keenly, poetry. The perspective of young teens coming of age amidst the progressive waves made by the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement tells the story of children acknowledging their place in White-dominated American society but realizing their agency as a result of the education they received at Freedom Schools. From that education, these students authored poems that expressed an array of emotions and perspectives regarding the current state of Black treatment in the United States: hope for their rights to be waiting at the end of a tumultuous tunnel; (righteous) anger because of the abhorrent treatment they and their friends, family, and ancestors received at the hands of White people; and defeat at of their belief that little would come from those fighting on the front lines for Black equality. In her article “Intratexturealities: The Poetics of the Freedom Schools,” Vonzell Agosto, explains,

These poems, constructed with and against relations of power, reflect the ambiguous, porous, and elusive borders between curriculum and lived experience, text and context, and words and meanings…. Their creation, usage, and layered meanings speak to present concerns about anti-oppressive and social justice education and youth activism.” (170)

What follows is the rhetorical analysis of three poems written by students of Freedom Schools, drawing on the ideas presented in Agosto’s work about Freedom School poetry.

“Once I wanted to fill the earth with laughter”

In a poem titled “Once I wanted to fill the earth with laughter,” the author, Lynda (no listed age or last name), contrasts her pure intentions to make the world a better place with her reality as a young Black girl in 1960s Mississippi. Through her careful and purposeful word choice and attention to tone, this brief two-stanza poem conveys Lynda’s defeat by the suffocating nature of the Jim Crow laws and the segregation plaguing the country.

The first stanza paints the picture of a world “ease[d]… of all its grief and pain,” made into a “marvelous place,” akin to the peace and calm of “the woods after a summer’s rain” as the result of the change and peace she hopes to bring (SNCC 31, lines 2–4). Lynda creates an ideal reality that is peaceful and safe—all the things her
lived reality is not. In many ways, the first stanza allows her innocence to live on, transcendent of time, encapsulating in ink on a page her idyllic view of what could be. In this way, her experience, thoughts, feelings, and aspirations are saved from the consuming nature of time and, in their finality, cannot be transgressed or altered by “know better” adults.

Soon after this picturesque world comes into view, however, Lynda shifts the tone of the poem into one dejected with the real world—a world that “will heed neither [her] help or desires” and that “silently sits and turns to [her] deaf ears” simply because “it has seen the color of [her] skin” (SNCC 31, lines 7, 9–10). Perhaps the most moving section in this piece is the lines in which the tonal shift occurs; Lynda states, “When I had finished; nothing it would lack / I had not learned, as yet, my skin was black” (lines 5–6). Lynda, through this tonal shift, takes the hand of the reader and walks them through her memories and experience—walks them through what it felt like to realize that the world you love does not love you.

While on the surface, the poem may appear to lack a call to action, Lynda places one covertly. Because she contrasts an ideal world with reality, the audience is presented with what could be if they took heed of her “help or desires” (SNCC 31, line 7); thus, they learn that to alter the country’s course, it is vital to listen to the wants, desires, needs, help, and, ultimately, voices of Black individuals, regardless of age. In Lynda’s poem, not only is it clear that she gained a level of racial consciousness, but her account reflects how “children and teenagers understood and engaged adult concepts and took their civic responsibilities seriously” (Berghel 435).

“Mine”

Similar to Lynda’s poem, Alice Jackson’s (age 17) poem, “Mine,” also describes an ideal world through her detailing various activities to which she wants access as a young Black girl in the South. As the poem progresses, Jackson asks for things that increase in extravagance but that reflect the reasonable wants of a teenager (e.g., “I want to live in the best hotel for a week”; SNCC 43, line 5). Her wants in this poem are not extreme in any sense, however; she wishes to “walk,” “sit,” “be served,” “live,” “swim,” and “go to … university” unmolested—all of which are basic requests of a normal life to her White counterparts, but because she understands her place in the social strata of segregated 1965 Mississippi, she feels she must enumerate and negotiate. An interesting aspect regarding the structure of this poem is Jackson’s description and presentation of the thing(s) she wants, followed by her commentary on what social repercussions would ensue if she were to participate in any of them in heavily segregated Mississippi. For example, Jackson longs for the ability to “walk the streets of a town. / Turn into any restaurant and sit down,” but to “be served the food of [her] choice, / and not be met by hostile voice” (lines 1–4). Incorporating the consequences of these actions not only creates discussion of the
systems in place that keep her from them but also pivots her into a position of negotiating power. Over the course of the poem, this power reaches its peak in the last four lines:

I want the things my ancestors thought we’d never have

They are mine as a Negro, an American;

I shall have them or be dead. (lines 9–12)

Jackson puts this conversation into perspective through the mention of her ancestors, who never had the opportunities she does have and could have. Her ancestors’ lack of access to activities of their own volition—autonomy—fuels her righteous fire and the sentiments of her poem. Jackson makes a promise to both the audience and herself that she will attempt to fulfill her wants or die trying, but most importantly, she refuses to be a bystander of social progress. Notably in this excerpt, she equates “Negro” and “American” in line 11, a clear rhetorical choice to state that her status as a Black American does not (and should not) negate or diminish her American status. Her equation of these two socially constructed ideas is even more significant because their comparison would surely cause outrage to a White audience. In pointing out rights to which she, as well as her ancestors, does not have access, Jackson “serve[s] as a record[er] of history by documenting events and ideas (through poetry)” (Agosto 177).

“The House of Liberty”

A poem that most clearly documents history through the lens of Black youth is Joyce Brown’s (age 16) poem, “The House of Liberty.” Brown attended the McComb Freedom School, and in this poem, she recounts the event of White supremacists’ bombing of the school prior to its opening (Hilberg 293). Brown captures the “political import” of the bombing in her four-stanza poem, which was “written for the opening of the McComb Freedom School on the grass before the bombed-out private home at which the school had to be held” (Hilberg 293; SNCC 14). Brown, in the first stanza, states her motivation for the poem, her education, and her want for freedom in every sense as “not for fortune, nor for fame” (SNCC 14, line 1). As the poem continues, she subtly addresses the bombing and the White supremacists behind it:

I shan’t let fear, my monstrous foe,

Conquer my soul with threat and woe,

Here I have come and here I shall stay,

And no amount of fear my determination can sway. (lines 5–8)
Brown states that “fear” is her enemy; however, the question then is, who or what is she afraid of? Arguably, the fear is of those who would bomb the very school she hoped to attend, those who remind her day in and day out that she is something else . . . something inherently other. Brown further addresses the concept of othering in the second stanza, claiming, “I asked for your churches, and you turned me down” (line 9). Churches (though particularly White, Evangelical Christian churches), places that ought to be pinnacles of care, charity, and grace, used their social power to keep themselves and their beneficiaries in control, and to Whites, letting Brown gain access would subvert that power. This does not deter Brown, however; the remainder of the poem calls out the behavior of scared and violent Whites who think that “because [they’ve] turned [her] away / [They’ve] protected [themselves] for another day” and that because “They’ve turned [her] down to humor [their] enemy, / Ah! [their] fate is sad and grim” (lines 13–14, 19–20).

As the poem continues, Brown uses her rhetorical skill to craft power for herself—a power that she wields over a hateful White audience. This power is mostly clearly seen in the several instances in which she can predict the future, in a sense: “But tomorrow must surely come,” “Your fate is sad and grim,” “For even tho’ your help I ask, / Even without it, I’ll finish my task” (lines 15, 20–22). Knowing the fate of another offers up a new dimension to the power dynamic between Brown and the racist Whites of McComb, Mississippi, and most notably, she tells them that she does not need their help, since she can complete her work without it. In essence, the effect that the Whites believe they have is hardly a hurdle to Brown, given that she knows that, without a doubt, she will get what she intends to: freedom from the fear and hate that the White majority has so long instilled. It is evident from Brown’s work that she understands the harsh reality of the world in which she lives. She is unwelcomed in White churches; her school was bombed by White supremacists; she and her classmates must attend school outside for the time being; and yet, creating art through poetry, and addressing the social injustices plaguing the Black community, in particular a hate crime that has directly affected her, set the tone for later poetry from the McComb Freedom School.

Agency and Artistic Expression

It is clear from the poetry analyzed that Freedom Schools provided the Black youth of Mississippi the means to explore the arts as well as to “respon[d] to the culture and politics of the freedom struggle” (Berghel 435). The classrooms of Freedom Schools opened up new worlds for Black students to debate and discuss the social and political state of the United States with veteran Civil Rights Movement classroom leaders and their peers while exploring the intersectionality of race and Black history in the issues discussed. Through poetry and other artistic expressions, students could “test out” their newfound political agency, find their voices, and use rhetoric to fight their battles. Although poetry was not strictly part of the curriculum,
the students’ creation of it was their artistic revision of the curriculum; through authoring these poems, students addressed their own academic and artistic needs, reflected on lived experiences, documented history, and ultimately sought to understand their place as young Black children and teens in 1960s U.S. Southern society.

Conclusion

From the research conducted to complete this essay, it is evident that a lack of literature within the niche of the analysis, reflection, and valuation of Freedom School intellectual activity, chiefly poetry, within Civil Rights rhetoric needs to be remedied. These students grew up in one of the most turbulent eras of the past century in the United States, and their story and writing are vital pieces to Black history, rhetoric, and art. In research, there were few discussions of the lives that these students would go on to lead, a part of the story that in future literature should be addressed in order to understand the far-reaching and time-transcendent effects of Freedom Schools. The Freedom Schools provided the opportunity for Black students in Mississippi to become aware of their political selves, and in doing so, they fostered young Civil Rights activists who were passionate and dedicated to social progression. The poetry that would come from these freshly realized agents of social change documented their struggles as Black individuals living in a time and country unsettled by their very existence, as well as the voting power they could now wield as a result of their education.

There is more research to be done and literature to be written on this subgenre of Civil Rights rhetoric, given that the rhetorical and political power of Freedom School students has not been recognized in equal standing to that of other adult Black rhetors of the Civil Rights Movement. It may prove beneficial for future literature to incorporate into this conversation the failings of American public schools to a higher degree. As it was not conducive to this paper, much discussion of the flaws with the public school system was omitted; however, other scholars should address the cradle-to-prison pipeline, staggeringly low percentages of Black and brown students achieving higher education, and other various and insidious ways that systemic racism pervades the American school system.
Works Cited


