Title: Building and Transferring Movement Informational Wealth: The SNCC Digital Gateway

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Abstract: When activists know there is a big hole in a people’s history, and the people who made the history are still alive to tell it, yet they have concerns about the ability of historians and universities to accept new avenues of producing knowledge, how does the group set up an archive-building project? This paper explores one such attempt made between the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP) and Duke University between 2013-2018.

Article: People’s understanding of what’s important in history is driven by what is left out as much as it is by biased history writing.¹ This is true not only for consumers of history, but also for historians. Historians certainly show bias. And they only write about what they can find evidence of – what they can find through archives, oral histories, and big data.

Sometimes this means a massive loss of information. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (“Snick”), dismantled large parts of legalized segregation in the United States in just eight years, between 1960-68.² They were young activists—most Black, some not—who fought segregation in the very places in which it was most deeply rooted -- Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Georgia. They worked with local people who were able to succeed in securing voting rights and political participation in some of the poorest and most dangerous counties in the South. Despite ferocious violence from white supremacists—beatings, whippings, burnings, rapes, tortures, killings—they themselves acted nonviolently. Routinely, observers were stunned. Then impressed. And, often, won over. Here were young people who defied all odds, who attempted the seemingly impossible. They not only questioned terrible, yet deeply ingrained, assumptions. They went out to challenge them.

Between 1960-1968, SNCC was the only national, Southern-based civil rights organization begun and led primarily by young people, with most younger than twenty-five years old. Its full-time student workers, “field secretaries,” worked with local Black activists, sharecroppers, teachers, ministers and day laborers to generate new community organizations and to create a radically inclusive democracy that valued all of its citizens. As SNCC activist and SLP member, Charles Cobb, explained:


At a deeper level than the immediate political concern with voter registration, SNCC’s work was also about cultivating new local leadership and reinforcing existing local leadership. SNCC field secretaries did not see themselves as community leaders but as community organizers, a distinction that empowered local participants by reinforcing the idea at the heart of SNCC’s work in every project that “local people” could and should take control of their own lives.

And yet, fifty years later, at a reunion in 2010, SNCC veterans realized that very few US school children, or US citizens, knew anything about their work. It was as if the entire team that made possible the first successful moon landing, Apollo 11, was simply dismissed after the mission landing. As if nobody from NASA debriefed them. Nobody asked what they had learned. Nobody asked their advice for future space trips. Imagine how peculiar -- and dangerous to future missions -- it would be if the hard-won experiential knowledge of these astronauts and their support team had been ignored.

That’s where SNCC veterans found themselves in 2010. Few people knew of their work furthering the nation’s democratic promise. It is a fate common for social movements. As Thomas Jefferson once observed, “A great deal of knowledge about the revolution is not on paper, but only within ourselves.” The SNCC veterans formed a nonprofit organization, the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP), in 2011, to preserve and share this history, in particular with young activists.

By 2013, SLP joined together with Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies (CDS), and Duke University Libraries (DUL). The aim of the partnership: to build an online archive chronicling SNCC’s historic struggles for voting rights and to develop ongoing programs that contributed to a more civil and inclusive democracy in the 21st century.

The partnership seeks to tell the history of SNCC from the perspective of the activists themselves and pass on the essential “how-to’s” of the freedom movement to subsequent generations. In 2013 the SLP-Duke collaboration began work on its first initiative, a pilot website entitled, One Person, One Vote: The Legacy of SNCC and the Fight for Voting Rights (OPOV). The “documentary website” used documents, photographs, and audiovisual material from archives across the country to portray SNCC’s fight for voting rights. We launched the website in March 2015 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act.

The website was the first and primary focus of what partners from SLP and CDS originally envisioned as a four-part collaborative project. The components include:

1. A digital gateway (documentary website) about SNCC’s history authored by SNCC veterans;
2. A conference connecting SNCC veterans and young(er) activists together around the theme of voting rights (September 2015);
3. Critical oral history sessions exploring SNCC’s thinking, strategies, actions, and innovations (2016 and 2018) to develop more comprehensive records of key events;

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3 The multi-volume video series of the 2010 SNCC 50th Anniversary Conference is at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.
4. A kindergarten through 12th grade (K12) initiative that shares the above knowledge with those who teach Movement history to the vast majority of young people (ongoing workshops since 2017).

How did we work effectively as a collaborative and why did we focus first on a website instead of a book, film, or other digital media formats? For the SNCC Legacy Project members, this project was in itself another stage of Movement activity – the transfer of hard-won information from one generation of activists to future generations. It was essential to have as low a barrier, with as far a reach as possible -- so that others could find and use the material. An early non-negotiable principle for SLP was free access to a website – no university-based firewall or sign-in required. The archivists and scholars on the team were also interested in this approach. They wanted to explore how digital humanities technologies might allow them to create new forms of archives to bring bodies of knowledge that have not been easily documentable to come into the world of “knowledge” and “scholarship-building.” Since we all agreed that our audience was a broad public, and since we particularly wanted to reach youth, the Duke University partners agreed on web-based content.5

The collaboration seeks to change the usual story told of the US Civil Rights Movement. SLP people referred to this story as the Nine Word Problem: what almost everyone knows about the movement can be reduced to nine words: “Rosa Parks. Martin Luther King. I Have a Dream.” Instead, the core story that SNCC wants to pass on encompasses three central ideas. First, young people and women were key leaders and troops in this movement whose leaders have often been wholly associated with adult men. Second, the movement was a primary force for democracy and self-determination for all. SNCC workers together with youth and elders in local communities worked to build leaders at the base of society to demand a say in their own lives. SNCC called this “building the ‘demand’ side” of democracy. Third, for fifty years journalists and scholars perpetuated destructive myths about the origins and development of “Black Power,” a call that came initially from SNCC organizers in 1966. SLP wanted to set the record straight. Black Power encompassed the right to define concepts like beauty, knowledge, and power; the power to control one’s communities politically; and the power to use electoral politics to enhance Black communities’ economic resources. Black Power meant having a say in the national political dialogue from a perspective of power and not victimization.

The goal of the collaborative is to tell the story of SNCC’s organizing from the bottom-up and inside-out, exploring how affected people organized to change history, while also making SNCC materials more widely accessible to students, teachers, activists, and knowledge-seekers. Since the 1970s, scholars have emphasized the importance of bottom-up history in balancing the historical record.6 While activists and historical participants appear as subjects in archival activities that emphasize this bottom-up approach, they rarely get to shape and interpret the story in a way that accurately reflects their experiences and understandings. Having activists work to shape and interpret the story, what SLP activists Courtland Cox and Geri Augusto

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5 As numerous other scholars pointed out to us along the way, few research universities validate this form of knowledge-production in their tenure and promotion schema. Peer-reviewed articles and books published in university-presses are still the primary path for younger scholars to join the ranks of the tenured. Thus it is vital to note that those on our scholars’ team – Chafe, Crosby, Hogan, Jeffries, Tyson – all did not need to pursue tenure as they did this work. We recognize that this allowed us a freedom rare for many other university-based scholars.

dubbed history not just from the bottom-up, but also from the “inside-out,” has proved a crucial innovation. SLP and Duke sought to create a replicable model of this bottom-up, inside-out approach for future partnerships between activists and scholars in which the former would have the primary voice in assembling archival materials and shaping the historical narrative.⁷

The collaborative launched the website *One Person, One Vote* in March 2015. Throughout the first two years of the project, SNCC veterans came to Duke’s campus as Visiting Activist Scholars, working with students, archivists, and project staff to engage SNCC’s documentary legacy and contextualize its history of organizing for Black empowerment and democracy.

In April 2015 the collaboration received a three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a private philanthropic organization, to expand the work of the pilot website into the [SNCC Digital Gateway](https://www.sncddigital.org) (SDG). The SDG unveils the inner workings of SNCC as an organization, examining how it coordinated sit-ins and freedom schools, voter registration and economic cooperatives, anti-draft protests and international solidarity struggles. Most importantly, the SNCC partners themselves continue to shape the vision and framework of the website. They work collaboratively with historians of the Movement, archivists, youth activists and undergraduate and graduate students to weave together grassroots stories, using digitized primary source materials to create fresh multimedia productions that illuminated this history for new generations.

II.

Although we live in a time of unprecedented document production, an era of “democratized documentation” where everyone with access to a smartphone can create and save millions of pieces of information about their lives, it remains challenging to develop institutional practices to guide the gathering, contextualization, and distribution of archival material from people who do not habitually visit or donate their documents to archival centers.⁸ If universities do not develop

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a rich and vibrant set of such practices in their archives, they will remain very good repositories for people who want to tell stories of the powerful and may remain adequate for telling stories about those on the margins of power and wealth. That is to say, scholars and students will be able to tell stories from the outside-in, using archival sources. But we will continue to deny future generations the stories from people at the margins of power and wealth who may be able to tell their stories from the inside out.

Why is this essential? Because without such perspectives, we risk preserving a distorted view of our cultural and political history. In fact, we sometimes put material in the archive that is not only single-sided, but inaccurate in itself. Oral historians have had indisputable proof of this for almost a century. In the 1930s, as Black and white interviewers from the Federal Writers Project (FWP) traveled around the South to document the experiences of freed-people who had experienced slavery, two federal employees interviewed Susan Hamlin. In an example that has become iconic in oral history seminars throughout the US, Hamlin was first interviewed by an African American man from the FWP, Augustus Ladson. Subsequently, Hamlin was interviewed by a white woman, Jessie Butler. Butler left some doubt in Hamlin’s mind: was she interviewing Hamlin for history’s sake, or as part of an investigation by the local welfare office? At any rate, though both the white woman (Butler) and the Black man (Ladson) worked from a common set of Federal Writers Project questions that included the freed-person’s personal history, work experiences, education, diet, and the slave-to-“owner” relationship, look at how Hamlin responds when asked by the two interviewers to share information on how she experienced slavery:

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9 Howard Zinn’s observation in 1977 holds true in the majority of US archives today: “The collection of records, papers and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men not women, white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men.” Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” The Midwestern Archivist 2:2 (1977) 21. Lisa Darms lays out some of the challenges radical archives face when trying to fit into archival workflows: Darms, “Radical Archives: Introduction,” Nov. 2015, Available online: [http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/radical-archives/](http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/radical-archives/) Accessed 28 June 2016.

This is a reality of information collection that remains no less powerful if archivists and historians ignore it. Plenty do. It is a reality that not only limits our understanding of slavery and US white supremacy, but one can easily extrapolate and imagine how similar dynamics cut off our ability to document the experiences of anyone on the margins of wealth and power: colonized people, women of all backgrounds, religious minorities, children, undocumented immigrants, trauma survivors, military veterans, Indigenous people, members of the LGBTQ+ communities, and people with intersecting marginalized identities. If we cannot document these experiences, we cannot write about them, teach about them, or bring the understanding they supply into our commonly-held public awareness.

The American majority who are on the margins of power and wealth need to tell stories on their own terms, and make the key decisions about how those stories are collected, archived, contextualized and disseminated to the public. If the American majority is not at the center of the decision-making, the knowledge base of our lives is dramatically limited to the medical, state, and legal documents produced by a numerically-small and experientially-narrow group of professionals and experts.11

Yet as many archivists and historians know, this almost never happens. The reasons, more often than not, are quite practical. It is not straightforward to work with people on the margins of

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11 For a dramatic example of this, see Elspeth H. Brown, “Trans/Feminist Oral History: Current Projects” Transgender Studies Quarterly 2:4 (2015), 667 who observes that almost all LGBTQ+ history relies on oral history as a “corrective to medical, state and legal discourses that have historically framed same-sex desire as pathological.” Professor Sergio Lopes made a similar point: it took his team years to create enough trust with metal union workers to build an archive about their opposition to the Brazilian military dictatorship in the 1970s, but the archive helped them create their own personal feelings of survival and efficacy and kept their work as a part of the nation’s broader story. José Sergio Leite Lopes, 28 Feb. 2018, notes in W. Hogan’s possession.
power and wealth. These are often people who have been taught that both their lives and their stories are of no value, therefore the concept of documenting and recording their stories seems irrelevant, a waste of time and energy. Archives and archivists have historically been complicit in devaluing these kinds of stories as well. Many archives chase “well-known” donors and collections for years while ignoring communities on the margins. Archival description and cataloguing also limits the findability of these types of materials in collections. In fact, many archives today are undertaking projects to uncover “hidden” collections already within a repository that actually document marginalized communities but were described in earlier eras with an emphasis on those in power. Additionally, the formalities and requirements of the academic and institutional world seem burdensome and the balance of power in the negotiations feels unequal. This results in a conflict between two worlds. University-based scholars may find it difficult to find people willing to tell their stories. Activists may participate in a project, and then move, making it difficult for institutions to track them down for permissions and/or further decision-making. Activists may be impatient about archival processes, or not have the time to catalog and contextualize their materials. Above all, activists are often justifiably suspicious of the extractive process used by institutions who want their papers, interviews, and ephemera and use them for purposes not their own – institutions who do not act as if they are accountable to activists and their communities. This reality leads globally to a gross imbalance: there are many more millions of cubic feet of papers in the world’s archives that document centrist and conservative political activity, compared to the tiny number of archives that document small-d democratic movements.

The SNCC veterans are somewhat unique because they have worked with those on the margins of power and wealth for over five decades. They understand the need to document the historical narrative of struggles for civil and human rights waged by these very people if society meant to uphold what historian Howard Zinn called the “spirit of democracy,” which demanded that the “condition, the grievances, the will of the underclasses become a force in the nation.” SNCC veterans know that if they do not tell the stories from the bottom up, those who made the history will once again be ignored. Again, they are like returning astronauts, passionate to share the wealth of information they acquired on their journey with others who might travel similar paths. Therefore, the SLP came to the table in 2013 willing to do all of the work of staying with the project from conceptualization, through fundraising, and carrying out of the work itself, as full partners with Duke. SLP put two non-negotiable requirements on the table: (1) make sure the site had no paywall, and could be accessed by anyone, at any time; and (2) the intellectual property – both original papers and new material created over the course of the project – was shared by SLP and Duke. After negotiating with the Duke legal team, Naomi Nelson, the head of Duke’s Rubenstein Library, was able to move forward with an agreement to make the material as open as possible via US Creative Commons licenses and contract language prohibiting future paywalls or similar requirements. Copyrights for attributed new works created for the SNCC Digital Gateway would belong to the authors, while copyrights for unattributed new content would be owned by the SNCC Legacy Project. The authors and SLP then granted Duke non-exclusive, perpetual licenses to publish and provide access to the content using US

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Creative Commons licenses. This creator-centric approach reflected SNCC values regarding the value of work and respecting the rights of the creators who do the work. It also helped answer an early and ever-present question among the partners: “Can I trust you as we walk into this process?”

In building this trust, our team had many hurdles to overcome – some historical, some based on first-person experience. On the historical front, many US universities themselves grew out of money stolen through slave labor. During the 19th and 20th centuries, universities consistently abused Black people in medical settings – most infamously through the Henrietta Lacks case at Johns Hopkins and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment in Alabama. Most institutions were also legally segregated until the mid-20th century, and many SNCC activists were groomed on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as opposed to majority-white universities. A whole body of so-called scholarship funded and endorsed by universities provided “scientific evidence” about the natural inferiority of those of African descent. This so-called scholarship provided a justification for the discrimination against Black people in America. The history of music companies included the stealing of intellectual and cultural property of blues and early rock and roll musicians. SNCC veterans working in Mississippi in 1964 in a “Freedom Summer” project in a coalition of other civil rights organizations, the Council of Federated Organizations or COFO, witnessed first-hand the way in which Brown University, a northeastern liberal arts institution with a sizeable financial endowment and influence, had initially approached small, historically Black Tougaloo College in Mississippi with offers of financial assistance and student-faculty exchanges. These offers of assistance moved to efforts to control Tougaloo and dictate its retreat from civil rights movement activity. Brown officials did this work in cooperation with segregationist Mississippians. Ultimately this resulted in the removal of Tougaloo’s progressive president who had encouraged student, staff and faculty participation in the movement.

In addition to these historic barriers to trust, by 2013 SNCC veterans themselves had accumulated five decades’ worth of experience with journalists and scholars acting as “slander panderers” – those who got the story wrong and built their careers off of such distortions. In 2013 when we first gathered to see if we could work together, universities were beginning to account for their exploitation of Black people through slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries and remedy their exclusion of Black talent through Jim Crow in the 20th century. Still, it was clear that universities’ 21st century workflows and hierarchies still reflected those origins. University forms of knowledge-creation and -dissemination overwhelmingly reflected an extractive approach. Universities furthermore had long made it appear to many in SLP as if Black stories, histories and experiences were and are less valuable. Duke itself not only reflected these broader trends but had a tendentious, complex history of its own in the South as a private, historically white university that many in working class Black Durham still call “the Plantation.”

SNCC veterans had tried to work with community-based archives to avoid the hurdles posed by university partners. There are particular strengths to this approach as community-based archives are frequently the standard bearers for the group they both collect and service for research. There is to a great degree a feeling of safety in archiving within one’s own community. One needs less explanation and often obtains more understanding from the institution of a collection’s particular relevance. Yet SNCC had to find a community-based archive in an era of major defunding of public education and public libraries that started in the 1980s and continues today. This defunding narrowed the material base of archiving and knowledge-sharing. The community-based archiving tradition attempted to address this “reality of growing disparities in the historical record and their social consequences.”\(^9\) In such a climate, SNCC veterans discovered a reality faced by many groups looking to deposit their records in a public or community-based setting: “organizational, public archives often are at risk of losing a physical space and have fewer resources for making items available online,” and “university archives generally have more stability and online access.”\(^16\) Yet universities’ capacities to archive were not at all equal: many historically Black colleges and universities’ (HBCUs) archives employed fewer than ten people; most private research university archival teams employed forty to fifty staff working to build, preserve, and make publicly accessible their archives day-to-day. There were clear advantages to working with a university and fortuitous circumstances made Duke University a viable option.

So how did we begin to build trust? The commitment to equitable participation helped build strong relationships among project partners and fostered a respectful way of working together in light of the reality that Duke’s library would be the long-term site for the archive. Scholars and activists are trained to monitor accuracy, while the SLP’s primary goal was to focus on knowledge and meaning, to “get the story right” so historians and authors wouldn’t continue to “get it wrong.” SLP also wanted it in language and forms that could be easily accessed by others, particularly young(er) activists. In the early days, we found, like others before us, that it involved “constant negotiation, based on trust and mutual respect that sometimes takes a great deal of time and work.” This approach took historians “far from the practices they have been trained to follow.”\(^17\) Scholars, archivists, and project staff were dedicated to carrying out the SNCC partners’ vision. As John Gartrell of Duke Libraries explained to the SNCC partners, “We’re always accountable to you all.”

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\(^{15}\) For example, the Welfare Rights Initiative Oral History Project at Hunter College in New York saw the privatization of knowledge and “inability to access scholarship [as] a symptom of a much larger issue…a larger network of socioeconomic factors that include the inequities and systematic impoverishment of the public education system and the ‘disruption’ of higher education.” Cynthia Tobar, “WRI,” in Alisa Del Tufo, et al., eds., Mixtape: Groundswell Collective Vol. I (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 6.


\(^{17}\) Barbara Franco, quoted in Corbett and Miller, “A Shared Inquiry,” 20.

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A key component of our success is our refusal to follow universities’ “dominant individualistic career achievement model” of studying the freedom movement. Rather than pursue this work as an individual intellectual pursuit, we insisted on a collaborative, collective process. This required going against the flow of university life. For example, shared responsibility for fundraising and publicity meant that grant proposals and press releases sometimes had as many as twenty people who had to edit a single document. This required a much-longer timeline than a single scholar or archivist would traditionally allot for writing such materials, and we had to develop a work-flow that made it possible to track this number of revisions and allow everyone to approve others’ revisions. Another example involved making major decisions for the site’s content. This was not in the hands of one or two Primary Investigators (PIs) as would usually be the case at universities, but was a raucous, deliberative process that sometimes involved up to fifteen voices. Even collaborative public historians tend to think historians must have final say over content and interpretation. “Although team members and stakeholders may and should participate in the decision-making process, the buck stops with the historian,” reflected historians Corbett and Miller. “Responsibility without authority spells disaster.” Even partial sharing of authority posed challenges for scholars: “Quickly sizing up circumstances and learning how to work and play with others has generally not been a high priority” in the training most graduate students get in the historical profession. And none of the gatekeepers of the profession like graduate teachers or professional peer review “help develop mediation skills or an inclination to share authority.”

Rather than scholarship that became a means to fit in and get ahead in one’s scholarly career, we self-consciously pursued a model of creating knowledge that reflected group-centered leadership. Our research process itself explicitly bolstered small-d democratic practice over hierarchical ways of knowing. Compared to ordinary experiences in elite higher education institution where people frequently experience the “dis-ease borne from the daily lived experience of elite liberalism, where few overt racist references emerge but unstated presumptions of white superiority-wrapped in language of individuality, rationality and qualifications – are pervasive,” our work model identified and countered the individual hidden curriculum that too often defines how people study race, gender, policy, and knowledge-production. It was not a clean, straightforward process: we had to embrace risk -- not just tolerate it -- and make the road by walking it.

We also ran against the current standard of “scholarly detachment,” still prevalent in large sectors of the university world. We are not objective about the history of US racial terror and resistance to it. We do not think anyone who lays claim to civilized discourse and democracy should be objective, if objective means noting the “merits of all sides.” We lay claim to a vision of democracy that honors the struggles of previous generations of diasporic Africans such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth -- and non-Black allies like John Brown, Delores Huerta, and Grace Lee Boggs. We aim for a civilization and democracy that affirms Black life and equality. Instead of aspiring to detachment, we allow the viewer to see our bias as movement activists, activist archivists, and movement historians who openly and collaboratively work to create a narrative about the movement that opens up areas previously invisible, silent, and ignored. There is often a rift that sometimes seems the size of a pothole, and at others opens up wide enough to seem like a chasm, between what activists and scholars

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see as “knowledge” and “evidence.” In this field, we see our work as an essential, but not objective, corrective to the knowledge already produced solely among scholars about the freedom movement.\(^{21}\)

SNCC people created new forms within the SNCC Legacy Project to tell collective history and allow individual difference and conflict to emerge — a methodology of “critical oral history.”\(^{22}\) We built both individual oral histories and collective sessions that had the combined effect of a richer, more dense, and complex set of memories focused on how people experienced movement work.\(^{23}\) As movement veterans prepared for the critical oral history sessions, we found that their work in reviewing not only the document dossier, but their own archives — photos, letters, objects — prompted new thinking and rethinking of prior memory.\(^{24}\)


\(^{22}\) On “affirming black life” as basis of civilization and democracy, Charles McKinney’s powerful speech “Teaching the Civil Rights Movement during a Time of Universal Deceit,” at the Ohio State University’s Symposium on teaching the civil rights movement, “We Who Believe in Freedom,” 1 June 2018, notes in the author’s possession. Say Burgin has observed that “academic knowledge is privileged over other knowledge sources within the field…to the extent to which this privileging persists, our understanding of whiteness will move at the snail’s pace of the academic imaginary…considering activist knowledge on whiteness not only elucidates a richer history of the field, it allows for more complex understanding of whiteness, connects the field more closely with racial justice struggles and pushes scholarly debate beyond the confines of the academy.” Burgin, “Locating Douglas Fitch: The Roots of Colour and Activist Traditions in United States Critical Whiteness Studies,” Critical Race and Whiteness Studies 9:1 (2013).


\(^{24}\) Recent work in queer oral history reflects something true for SNCC veterans as well: “those seeking justice sometimes have to create new methods for historical research.” Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez. Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010) 1.

\(^{25}\) On Record: Files and Dossiers in American Life, Ed. Stanton Wheeler (Russell Sage Foundation, 1969.) 319-354. Robert Coles first chapter in Doing Documentary Work (NY: Oxford Univ. Pres, 1997) incisively examines the kinds of challenges faced when scholars try to include self-reflexive thinking in peer-reviewed journals and manuscripts. He and Linda Shopes (2014) point out the situated nature of all research methodologies and the ways gatekeepers allow certain kinds of evidence and exclude others. On “affirming black life” as basis of civilization and democracy, Charles McKinney’s powerful speech “Teaching the Civil Rights Movement during a Time of Universal Deceit,” at the Ohio State University’s Symposium on teaching the civil rights movement, “We Who Believe in Freedom,” 1 June 2018, notes in the author’s possession. Say Burgin has observed that “academic knowledge is privileged over other knowledge sources within the field…to the extent to which this privileging persists, our understanding of whiteness will move at the snail’s pace of the academic imaginary…considering activist knowledge on whiteness not only elucidates a richer history of the field, it allows for more complex understanding of whiteness, connects the field more closely with racial justice struggles and pushes scholarly debate beyond the confines of the academy.” Burgin, “Locating Douglas Fitch: The Roots of Colour and Activist Traditions in United States Critical Whiteness Studies,” Critical Race and Whiteness Studies 9:1 (2013).

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tested the “validity” of the documentary record, but we looked at how views of that record have
time.25

In recent months, as we presented the SNCC Digital Gateway to audiences in the US, Mexico,
and Brazil, people reacted to this unusual way we worked together with encouragement and
grateful. In Rio de Janiero, activists and scholars remarked that perhaps we had found a way
to apply Paolo Freire’s popular education ideas to archive-building. They suggested we were
designing a method of collaborative construction that did not just document political action, but
that was itself a political action. We extended this political action by documenting dialogues
among SNCC activists in the Critical Oral History sessions, and between youth active today with
SNCC veterans – on the website’s “Today” section, highlighting the 2015 voting rights
conference, the 2018 closing events, and the 2018 Critical Oral History sessions.26

The work we’ve done together to build the SNCC Digital Gateway, host the 2015 conference,
and build out the critical oral histories and K12 workshops – it has changed the way we operate.
For example, we never present or write up this material by ourselves, as just the SLP, or just a
university-based person. We always present and write as part of a collective. We are keenly
aware that archives reflect power relationships,27 but in this case, we tried to transform those
power relationships. We chose to organize ourselves in relationship to power as equals --
activists and archivists and academics. We approached the question of how to build access to
this information in a very intentional way. For instance, Hogan didn’t see herself first as a
scholar who then figured out how to document SNCC. Her primary goal was to have an impact,
to make this history useful to others. For some of the university-based people, this work
changed the way we thought about accountability to specific people we work with closely. We
made sure to prioritize maintaining the integrity of those relationships instead of prioritizing our
own institutional practices, habits, and bureaucratic procedures. We felt accountable to the SLP
activists, and to a set of mutually-agreed upon principles and values.

For us, acting in solidarity is partly a process of making common memory, between activists,
past and present, and scholars. For SLP members Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson, it
entailed returning to rural Lowndes County, where they worked over 50 years earlier as SNCC
activists, to find the local people with whom they worked to insure their stories of activism and
change would be told in their own words. The relationship with the scholars and archivists at
Duke helped reassure local people and activists from the 1960’s that the stories of their past
activism would be archived for the future, but not entombed; instead they would form the basis
for reflection and dialogue on current strategies and issues, online in digital form through the
SDG and through meetings and events with young activists from the Black Lives Matter
movement and Dream Defenders, among others, convened by SLP and Duke University. For

25 For a fascinating examination of how people’s views of the historical record change over time, see Anjali Arondekar, For the
Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India (Duke Univ. Press, 2009) 5.
26 Alexandre Fortes of the Pró-Reitor de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação UFRRJ, and John French of Duke University invited us to
present our work in Rio de Janeiro at the Colégio Brasileiro de Altos Estudos at UFRRJ in February 2018. We are deeply indebted to
them for this invitation, and for Fortes’ initial insight that perhaps we had found one way to apply popular education ideas to the
archive. Stephanie Reist quoted on Baixada organizing today, remarks in response to the talk at UFRRJ, 28 Feb. 2018, notes in W.
Hogan’s possession.
27 Archives reflect power relationships in many ways. For example, the police in Rio de Janiero’s Baixada have confiscated Afro-
Brazilian religious objects since 1887; this has become a captive archive; see Liberte Nosso Sagrado (Set Our Sacred Free) and
Carlos Fioravanti, “The Uncertain Fate of Police Museum Collections,” Pesquisa Fapesp 260 (Oct. 2017) Available online:
http://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/en/2018/02/22/the-uncertain-fate-of-police-museum-collections/; See also Joan M. Schwartz and
Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” Archival Science 2: 1–19 (2002); Available online:
https://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/methods/schwartz.pdf and Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in
the SLP, this informational wealth transfer and active use of the archives is as essential as the creation of the SDG.

The archivists involved in this work had an opportunity to integrate a workflow beyond simply digitizing primary source material. The SDG is as much an archive as it is a digital publication. Providing access to collections online is something archives are either striving to do, or doing on a regular basis, but access is only the first step. Having a hand in the creation of a platform that lends interpretation, and through critical oral histories and the audio-visual pieces on the site, the SDG is in and of itself, a primary source. This kind of documentary creation breaks with tradition of the archive, going from knowledge keeper to knowledge creator. Extended collaborative work also meant the opportunity to exchange the values of archives with an activist community that had reasonable reservations about their work. As we all waded into issues like intellectual property, copyright, reproduction, permissions, processing, digitization, and access, the SNCC activists were afforded an opportunity to better understand the issues archives address.

III.

In summary, the experiences of SNCC people in challenging the US to live up to its mission of “liberty and justice for all” is too valuable not to find a way to archive permanently for future citizens. Courtland Cox noted recently that “Our youth have to have the benefit of our information, if not experiences, so they have a head start as they continue their struggle in America.” He called this project a “critical transfer of informational wealth.” The term stuck. SNCC activist Joyce Ladner rejoined: “if nothing else will save the most vulnerable of this generation, then informational wealth may be used to do so.” The SNCC Digital Gateway provides one model for how universities and social movements might partner on an egalitarian basis to identify, archive, and disseminate the lessons learned inside social movements.

Social movements themselves are highly valuable sites of knowledge production. This is not a claim that scholars, foundations, and universities have easily acknowledged. Instead, social movements are either seen as sites for extraction of information or data, or as unruly impositions on orderly university life, or both. Universities historically have used their asymmetrically overwhelming resources and cultural authority to legitimize certain forms of knowledge and dismiss others. In research libraries, whether or not an archive has “research value”—that is, whether PhD-trained scholars decide it is useful—remains the single factor that most heavily determines what archives to save, and what to dismiss or omit. It is a practice “patently at odds with shared knowledge economies in an information age,” as archivist Bryan Giemza noted recently. Allowing university-based PhD’s to be the primary deciders of what to keep, he reflects, is “self-evidently in conflict with contemporary models that position the production of knowledge as a process of co-creation.”

That co-creation, among activists, scholars, students, knowledge seekers and communities, “working together through extended information commons,” is a major pillar sustaining democracy. Hierarchical modes of governance, after all, routinely attempt control over others by maximizing the information held by the powerful few, and minimizing the information available to the majority. With all exceptions duly noted, university-based archivists and scholars have rarely been transparent when examining “what counts” as evidence and knowledge, or who tells

the story. As theoretical physicist Lisa Randall recently observed, science has long been misshaped by the fact that "most people mistake their own perspective, shaped by their subjective and limited perception, for the absolute reality of the external world." For her, questioning this perspective has been crucial to advancing her field -- research on dark matter. Yet she found that "recognizing the limits of our senses and the subjectivity of our experiences" was also "the only thing that has ever advanced human empathy." It provided "the only route to transcending" our subjective experience.\(^{29}\) The blind spots she identified did not just limit advancement within theoretical physics. They have led to significant gaps in knowledge across the university. The experience of the SDG forced parts of our team to recognize that universities have rarely taken activist epistemologies seriously on their own terms, and have not developed strong institutional pathways to include activists in scholarly production. This has led to large areas of social movements that scholars simply do not understand, such as recruiting, civic education of participants, definitions of movement success, and strategies to negotiate power between social movements and established political parties.

The SNCC Digital Gateway is an important development precisely because working collaboratively as activists, scholars and university administrators, we have made paths for activists’ knowledge to be present, be preserved, and be disseminated. We have made paths for scholars’ insights, methodologies, and values to play pivotal role in this knowledge creation. People need these histories – otherwise the quest for democracy is too easily dismissed as suspicious or impractical. The SDG has the potential to illuminate how these young people in SNCC, often under 25 years old, shaped the entire nation for the better. Their history is our public patrimony, one that should not be held hostage by bureaucratic restrictions that universities and archives often follow. Public access to creativity and memory, not reserved or made secret, has the potential to open up gatekeeping so that scholars and archivists are not the center of reference for knowledge production.

Informational transfer is taking place as young(er) activists use the SDG site and seek out SNCC veterans. “We pretend there’s no conflict in the Baixada movement today,” Stephanie Reist, one young Brazil-based activist reflected. “Perhaps if people understood the conflicts inside of historic movements like SNCC, such as how they handled conflict when they were growing so quickly, we’d have less failures inside our movement today.” For Phillip Agnew, co-founder of the Dream Defenders in Florida, the archival legacy of SNCC—its meeting notes, its minutes, its pictures—has helped Dream Defenders “have perspective about where we are, where we’re going.” The SNCC Digital Gateway, he explained, “provides a compass for organizers of today to really guide our work, guide our strategy, and begin to build on the legacy that SNCC has built.” Agnew also praised SNCC’s living legacy: the actual SNCC veterans who shepherded the Dream Defenders through trying times as an organization, “who were there as people to give advice, to provide counsel.” “SNCC never died,” he noted. “SNCC is very, very present in the DNA of what we’re doing.”

More information on how the project worked can be found at https://snccdigital.org/resources/lessons-learned/
