

The Road to Internationalism: A SNCC Movement Worker Reflects

By Gloria House

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THE YEARS 1965 TO 1967 mark my work as a SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) field secretary in Alabama, and the beginning of a lifelong commitment to the African-American liberation movement and the worldwide struggles for human rights. This was a period of fierce rebellions in major cities across the United States as African Americans expressed our rage at the continued oppression of our communities. It was also a period when many of us activists began to travel abroad, to Africa in particular, but also to other Third World countries.

I was part of the SNCC faction that called for a strong international orientation and self-determination for oppressed nations around the world, including our own nation of 30 million Black people in the United States. This new direction grew out of our deepening understanding of our history as a people in America, and in Africa, and our identification with liberation movements of the period in Asia, South America, and Africa. Our work coincided with these liberation struggles, and we were beginning to see ourselves as part of this worldwide upheaval of oppressed peoples fighting for freedom.

Colonized people worldwide, some of whom were engaged in armed struggle against European powers, were consolidating their national, cultural and political movements, and working to build international solidarity as the Third World

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— rejecting alignment with both the Western camp and the Soviets, perceived as the first and second “worlds.” The African-American civil rights and Black power movements of the ’60s and ’70s constituted a significant flank of this global uprising of oppressed peoples, with many of us viewing our movement as a national liberation struggle, for we were beginning to think of ourselves as constituting an internal colony of the United States.

We saw that our social, political and economic conditions paralleled those of Third World peoples, making it very easy for us to identify with them: our communities were occupied by hostile police forces; we did not own property or businesses in many of our neighborhoods; the schools and other essential institutions were not under our control; we faced disabling discriminatory policies in our search for work and decent housing.

During this same period, we witnessed emerging movements among other people of color in the United States, national groups marginalized and subjected to racism and discrimination as were African Americans, who were also beginning to see themselves as colonized people. The will to self-determination fueled the protests and infused the literature of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and African Americans during this period.

In June 1967, a group of armed Mexican Americans converged on the courthouse of the little town of Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico. They were members of the *Alianza Federal de Mercedes* (The Federal Alliance of Land Grantees). Seven members of their organization had been arrested the previous Friday, June 2nd, and charged with attending an *Alianza* meeting, which had been declared illegal by the district attorney and by the state police commander. The armed men had come to rescue these comrades. In the confrontation that ensued, the men took two hostages, a deputy sheriff and a UPI reporter. After escaping through several police blockades, they released the hostages, and disappeared into the mountains.¹

The militants in the Tierra Amarilla courthouse raid were descendants of Mexican Americans whose village land holdings should have been protected by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by the United States and Mexico in 1848. However, by the 1960s, most of those heirs had lost their land. In a communique intended for the United Nations, the *Alianza* expressed the people’s cause in this manner:

We lack the means to farm since our lands were taken away. We cannot properly engage ourselves in industry or commerce either. We are not integrated into U.S. society, and live in disharmony with the Anglo-Saxon people because of the manner [in which] these people regard us. We do not enjoy the basic human rights of proper housing and city services. Since we live in terrible misery, we do not participate



Native American occupation of Alcatraz, 1969-1971.

*directly or indirectly as individuals or collectively in the political process that affects our life. Because we do not have our land, we are lacking this basic human right.*²

A conservative estimate indicates that between 1854 and 1930, Mexican Americans lost over 2,000,000 acres of privately owned land, 1,700,000 acres of communal land, and 1,800,000 acres taken by the United States government without payment to the heirs. Much of the federally-held land is now committed to national forests and parks. This enormous dispossession, which had been carried out violently by soldiers and ranchers, is considered “to have destroyed the entire economic basis of the Mexican American rural villages... [and] played a major role in the formation of a large distressed area marked by high incidence of poverty, and social disorganization.”³

Sporadically, militants in this land struggle would retaliate in guerilla tactics like the courthouse raid, cutting of fences, or occupying federal park land that they believed had been stolen from their people. For two decades, national groups of color within the United States reiterated the demands expressed at Tierra Amarilla, insisting that they needed land and sovereignty as people in order to survive.

On November 20, 1969, a group of Native Americans occupied Alcatraz, the abandoned island off the coast of San Francisco, California. They tried to win government permission to build an educational-cultural-spiritual center on the island. Rejecting the Indians’ proposal as unfeasible, the U.S. government announced its own plans to make the island a national park.

The Native Americans continued the occupation for almost two years, in spite of the isolation and hardships of a water shortage created by the government’s removal of the

water barge that had always supplied the island, and the government’s shutoff of electricity and telephone service. Finally, in June 1971, federal marshalls forcibly removed the Native Americans from the island.

Though the small group could not garner the popular support that would have allowed them to remain on Alcatraz and create a community there, their effort did not fail to illustrate the ideological point: they saw themselves as a dispossessed people, demanding a base from which they could exercise control of their own destiny.

Confrontations between dispossessed groups and the U.S. power structure occurred throughout the period. Tierra Amarilla and Alcatraz were followed by the struggle at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. In February 1973 the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the Pine Ridge Reservation near Wounded Knee, intending to reclaim their right to self-determination and sovereignty over the land taken in defeat of the Sioux nation in 1890.

The standoff between AIM and the federal government continued for over two months. Finally there was a violent siege by U.S. military and intelligence agents, and the occupation ended in a truce. However, in 1980 the Sioux did finally win a financial settlement of \$105 million for loss of the Black Hills; they also filed a subsequent suit to demand return of the land itself.⁴ Other Native American nations initiated legal suits as well, to demand return of lands or compensation for dispossession during U.S. expansion.

During the 1960s and ’70s, many revolutionary nationalist formations emerged among people of color in the United States: Mexican American youth in urban areas organized themselves into the Brown Berets (1967), demanding Chicano self-determination, and supporting the movement for restoration of Mexican land holdings; Puerto Rican militants formed the Young Lords (1969) and other political groups to bolster the longstanding Independence movement on the island.

On the West Coast, Japanese-American youth generated the first protests against the segregation and repression their elders had experienced in U.S. concentration camps during World War II. In the northern cities, the Republic of New Africa (founded March, 1968) and other political organizations began to include the demand for land on their agendas, based on the centuries of Black labor invested in cultivating the land of the Black Belt South and building the industrial power of United States.

My point is that a passion for self-determination characterized all these groups, and wherever possible, their political actions called for or attempted to reclaim space or places essential to their identity. From African-American demands of “Black Power” and “community control” to lawsuits in which Native American nations have challenged the U.S. government to return stolen land, activists in these movements were



reacting to four centuries of oppression implemented in large part through ruling-class control of the land — the natural and built environments — of North America.

Segregated in America's reservations and ghettos, we had not experienced the personal or collective power that supposedly derives from citizenship in the United States. Consequently, we were fighting for the right to create our own communities without fear of repression in the forms of police control, violence, government surveillance (as in such programs as COINTELPRO), and other genocidal policies.

Our demonstrations of solidarity with the Vietnamese people were an important part of this internationalization of consciousness and activism. SNCC's statement against the war, which I drafted during a national staff meeting in Atlanta, was a reflection of the thoughts and arguments that were articulated primarily by the nationalist faction within SNCC. Whether we should issue a statement against the war was debated heatedly. The opposition to the statement by some SNCC staffers was not, of course, because they supported the war, but because they correctly foresaw that once the statement was released, SNCC would lose the support of the Northern liberal establishment.

The SNCC Vietnam statement reflected our solidarity with the struggles of colonized peoples in the Third World, while pointing out the hypocrisy of the United States' stated dedication to freedom and democracy: We stated:

The United States government has been deceptive in claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for the freedom of the colored people in such other countries as the Dominican Republic, the Congo, South Africa, Rhodesia and in the United States itself...

[SNCC's] work, particularly in the South, taught us that the United States government has never guaranteed the freedom of oppressed citizens and is not yet truly determined to end the rule of terror and oppression within its own borders... We recall the numerous persons who have been murdered in the South because of their efforts to secure their civil and human rights, and whose murderers have been allowed to escape penalty for their crimes.

Ongoing protests against the war in Vietnam by African Americans and other oppressed national groups, ranging from street demonstrations to draft resistance — which led in some cases to prison or exile — expressed our firm solidarity with the Vietnamese and other Third World independence struggles, including that of the Palestinians.

The important point here is that these actions reflected that we were seeing ourselves on the world stage, in the larger light of internationalism, not simply within the boundaries and political context of the United States. We were oppressed national groups of color joining the worldwide community to which we belonged.

How had we arrived at this perspective? I would answer that question within the framework of the evolving Black consciousness of African-American activists of the period.

Building Our African Identity

The tenacity of racial prejudice, the relentlessness of organized violence against African Americans throughout U.S. society, and the intransigent segregation prevalent in all major arenas of life — the courts, housing, education, employment — had convinced many in my generation that African Americans would never win equal treatment as citizens of the United States. Alienated by the closed door of American whiteness and racial oppression, persistent for four centuries, many political activists, intellectuals and writers of the period sought our true identity elsewhere.

We turned to Africa, the Motherland. With unprecedented intensity, Black artists and writers in all parts of the Diaspora attempted to wrest ourselves psychologically from the hold of Eurocentric conventions, to forge a new aesthetic based on African arts, cultural practices and spiritual traditions. Identification with Africa reconfigured all aspects of daily life for the “conscious” of this generation — including acceptance of our own African physical features, reclamation of African clothing, art and artifacts, music, dance and religion.

Most important, this identification sustained engagement by activists in the work of solidarity with countries fighting for independence from colonial powers — Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, South Africa. We studied the writings of African liberation leaders like Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah and Amilcar Cabral, from whom we learned the essential role of indigenous culture in the formation of revolutionary theory and practice.

We collected and shipped medical supplies, arranged solidarity exchanges, raised funds, and organized forums and teach-ins to inform our communities of the day-to-day struggles of the African liberation campaigns. We would become equally engaged in solidarity with Cuba, and later with the Sandinistas of Nicaragua — speaking out against the imperialist role the U.S. government against these sovereign nations.

Fundamental to the internationalist thrust of the Black Consciousness movement and our identification as Africans in the Diaspora was the project of retrieving pre-colonial African history in order to reassert the role of African civilization onto the world stage. Emerging African and African-American scholars brought to light the magnitude of African history buried by Western cultural supremacist scholarship.

They exposed the unprecedented horrors of the European trade in human beings and pointed out the direct relationship between this human exploitation and the accumulation of capital that would ensure European and American powers their subsequent imperialist stature in the world. This intellectual work laid the basis for African-American activism within the Diaspora and elsewhere in the Third World. It also planted the seeds of the student demands of the 1970s and '80s to bring Black Studies into the academy.

My own pan-African/Diasporan consciousness had been awakened by my stay in Paris in 1961. There I had met African students who were supporting the revolutions being waged in their home countries. Long conversations with them helped to make revolution real for me, more than something theoretical that I had studied in the university.

Also at that time, life in Paris was destabilized by the Algerians' protests in support of their revolutionary com-

rades back home. Witnessing the determination of these seriously committed African freedom fighters heightened my own political consciousness so that I began to view U.S. foreign policy from a different vantage point, and with a great deal more discernment.

In 1970 I was invited to Cuba with a small group of U.S. activists for a seminar at which South American revolutionaries educated us concerning their struggles. Our stay on the island lasted a month, allowing us to see the 10 years of progress the Cubans had made in building a new society. I was deeply impressed that only a few miles off the Florida coast, the Cubans were engaged in creating the New Man and the New Woman — a new society with socialist values, in which literacy, education, health care and housing for all took priority over profit for the few, a society in which individuals and groups were being astounded by their own capacities of creativity and nation building.

In closing, I would like to call attention to the wide range of influences that were significant to us. In study groups we were reflecting upon the liberation theory and practice of revolutionaries throughout the Third World. Of course we read Mao, but we also learned about the courage of such individuals as Camillo Torres, the Columbian guerilla priest, and his early formulation of liberation theology, and Carlos Marighella and his *Manual of the Urban Guerilla*.

We were humbled and inspired by Lolita LeBron's commitment to Puerto Rican independence. Fidel and Che were admirable models, in that we viewed them as genuinely attempting to make revolutionary changes in themselves personally. Che's essay, “Man and Socialism,” outlines this transformative effort that would characterize the revolutionary person. This was an ideal of revolutionary engagement, rejecting elitism and intellectual arrogance, fostering international solidarity.

The influence of Frantz Fanon on African-American nationalist activists was enormous. The Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary personified internationalism, given his work in France and Algeria. We read his *Wretched of the Earth* as if it were scriptural text! In the chapter on “National Consciousness,” he reminded us that it is not our role to judge the effectiveness of our foreparents' freedom struggles. Rather, he pointed out, we are required to identify the liberation mission of our generation, and get busy.

For many African-American activists who came of age in the '60s, the understanding of our political and cultural ties to the international community of freedom fighters, and our insistence upon lifting the African-American struggle onto that stage through ongoing, consistent work have been major facets of our generation's mission — undertakings that carry on the work begun by the great African freedom fighters Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Paul Robeson and Malcolm X. §

Notes

1. “Poverty, Equal Opportunity and Full Employment,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Equal Opportunities of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives 94th Congress, Santa Fe, NM, May 2-3, 1975, 75-76.
2. Papers of Santiago Tapia y Anaya, then President of the Alianza Federal de Mercedes, Albuquerque, NM, accessible to author during American Mosaic TV Series interview, Detroit circa 1976.
3. Hearing of Subcommittee on Equal Opportunities, op.cit., 81 and 118.
4. “\$105 Million Given to Sioux,” *Sacramento Union News*, July 1, 1981, 1A.