

# The Geography of Nonviolence

## The United Nations, the Highlander Folk School, and the Borders of the Civil Rights Movement

In the summer of 1954, an unusual protest occurred at a Howard Johnson's restaurant in Roanoke, Virginia. A white couple sat down to eat with two students—one of whom was African American. The other student was harder to place in the binary racial system of Jim Crow America. He was from India. Upon seeing the interracial group, the waitress summoned a manager, who explained that Virginia law would not allow him to serve African Americans. Whether the Indian student was an issue remained unclear. The manager offered to feed the entire group in his office, but they refused, ordered their food to go, and kept their seats. When their sandwiches were prepared, they left without further incident. This was six years before a wave of sit-in protests spread across the American South, but it was not timing that made what occurred at that Howard Johnson's unusual. African American travelers had resisted Jim Crow since its inception, and sit-ins of various kinds had occurred repeatedly in the 1940s and early 1950s. Rather than the timing of the protest, it was the itinerary of the four people who dared to eat together that offers a unique window on the borders—chronological, geographical, and racial—of the American civil rights movement.<sup>1</sup>

The four travelers were returning from a workshop on the United Nations held at the Highlander Folk School, a tiny bastion of racial integration perched in the mountains of Tennessee. Highlander workshops were designed to empower people to confront problems in their own communities. Founded in 1932, the school was originally focused on inequities of class and labor. In the early 1950s, Highlander's curriculum pivoted toward the struggle against racism. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s,

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1 Avrahm Mezerik, "You All Begins to Mean All," *New Republic*, 1954, box 15, folder 13, Highlander Folk School Papers (HFSP), Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA). On racial borders, see James N. Leiker, *Racial Borders: Black Soldiers along the Rio Grande* (College Station, TX, 2010), and Karl Jacoby, "Racial Borders and Historical Borderlands: African Americans in Latin America," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (2007): 571–74.

the school hosted hundreds of civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks—a few months before she kept her seat on a bus in Montgomery and helped launch what is often called the “classic phase” of the civil rights movement.<sup>2</sup> Highlander became one of the nerve centers of the movement. Given the urgency of the struggle against Jim Crow, it might seem strange for Highlander to have hosted a series of workshops on the UN. But there was more than one link between the racial integration practiced at Highlander and the global integration embodied—at least in theory—by the UN.<sup>3</sup>

For Avrahm G. Mezerik, a journalist and UN correspondent, born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1901, it was the promise of unity across the borders of race and nation that explained the value of Highlander’s UN workshops. One of the featured speakers, Mezerik also served as an unofficial publicist for the gatherings. In an article he wrote for the *Nation* in November 1954, he celebrated the diversity of the participants: “a Negro bus operator from South Carolina, a young man from Travancore, India, a judge from the Cumberland plateau, students from Fisk, a Negro university, and the white University of Tennessee, union men, farmers, and educators.” At Highlander, this varied group “discovered that the U.N. was related to their own experience.” Their diversity mirrored the UN, but it was more than their diversity that mattered. As Mezerik put it, “Their little multiracial group, as the week progressed, became a unity—not just a gathering of individuals.” Mezerik’s enthusiasm for the workshops led him to claim, without offering evidence, that the students “were no longer conscious of dividing skin colors and accents.” He assumed that ignoring “skin colors and accents” was the way to eradicate racism. By contrast, many participants in Highlander’s UN workshops aimed not to erase difference or to reify it in a static pluralism but to find ways to forge solidarities of resistance across racial and national divides while neither ignoring nor erasing those divides. Mezerik himself left Highlander with more than a postracial fantasy of global harmony; he left with the determination to put integration into practice. It was Mezerik

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- 2 On the contested chronologies of the civil rights movement, see Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston, 2018); Jeffrey Helgeson, “Beyond a Long Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of African American History* 99, no. 4 (2014): 442–55; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 265–88; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63.
- 3 Stephen Preskill, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander Center’s Vision for Social Justice* (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2021); Kim Ruehl, *A Singing Army: Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School* (Austin, 2021); Victoria W. Wolcott, “Radical Nonviolence, Interracial Utopias, and the Congress of Racial Equality in the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4, no. 2 (2018): 31–61; Stephen A. Schneider, *You Can’t Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932–1961* (Columbia, 2014); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 9, 57; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003): 228–29, 237–39; Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); David P. Levine, “Citizenship Schools” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1999); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962* (Lexington, 1988); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1986), 139–40; Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC, 1975).



Figure 1. United Nations workshop at the Highlander Folk School. Note the poster displaying the preamble to the UN charter. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

and his wife who joined those two students—one African American and the other from India—in attempting to integrate the Howard Johnson’s in Roanoke. While his framing of integration at times elevated unity over diversity, Mezerik embodied the dual promise of Highlander’s UN workshops: that a discussion of global politics could inspire local action, and that such action could transgress the borders of race and nation.<sup>4</sup>

In 2009, historian Jason C. Parker noted that the literature on the “intertwined developments” of “Third World decolonization and American desegregation” had “coalesced into a synthesis of international history.” Since then, scholarship on the transnational dimensions of the civil rights movement has continued to grow in depth and breadth.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, studies of the movement focused on particular cities

4 Avraham Mezerik, “Experiment in the South,” *Nation*, November 27, 1954, box 15, folder 13, HFSP, TSLA. On the intellectual history of integration, see Jack Hanlon, “If the Word Integration Means Anything, This Is What It Means’: American Nationhood, African American Culture and the Concept of Integration” (master’s thesis, King’s College London, 2019); Ernest Allen Jr., “Notes on the Concept of Integration,” *Black Scholar* 42, no. 1 (2012): 2–15; Tariq Modood, “Multiculturalism and Integration: Struggling with Confusions,” in *Defending Multiculturalism: A Guide for the Movement*, ed. Hassan Mahamdallie (London, 2011), 61–76; Yomna Saber, “Lorraine Hansberry: Defining the Line between Integration and Assimilation,” *Women’s Studies* 39, no. 5 (2010); and Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896–1935* (Gainesville, FL, 2008).

5 Jason C. Parker, “‘Made-in-America Revolutions’? The ‘Black University’ and the American Role in the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 727–50, here 727.

or states have demonstrated the importance of local context.<sup>6</sup> Highlander’s workshops offer an opportunity to bring together these two strands in the literature—the transnational and the local—by examining how activists themselves navigated the geography of the movement. Dozens of Highlander workshops were recorded, and the audiotapes, now housed at the Tennessee State Library and Archives and the Wisconsin Historical Society, contain more than one hundred hours of conversations among civil rights activists, union organizers, radical scholars, and community leaders. While many of the conversations concerned the grassroots struggles Highlander was renowned for supporting, the recordings also provide a rare opportunity to listen in as civil rights activists struggled to bridge the local and the global by engaging what geographer Doreen Massey has called “that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres).” It was an act of radical “throwntogetherness” for Highlander participants to link the UN to local struggles against white supremacy, but the Highlander tapes do not offer easy connections across time or space. Rather than bridging the divide between the local and the global, the history of the UN workshops offers a more revealing way to conceptualize the borders of the civil rights movement—not, to use Massey’s words, “as something to be crossed and maybe conquered,” but as spaces of both connection and distance, in which recognizing limitations and differences generated new ways

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Also see Cole S. Manley, *The Unlikely World of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Solidarity across Alabama, the United Kingdom, and South Africa* (Montgomery, 2021); Asa McKercher, “Too Close for Comfort: Canada, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and the North American Colo(u)r Line,” *Journal of American History* 106, no. 1 (2019): 72–96; Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018); Ira Dworkin, *Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck, eds., *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (New York, 2015); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (Cambridge, 2012); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Frank A. Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kevin Gaines, “Locating the Transnational in Postwar African American History,” *Small Axe* 13, no. 1 (2009): 192–202; Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land? World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Robin D. G. Kelley, “How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-mapping of U.S. History,” in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 123–47; Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); and Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996).

- 6 Jessica D. Klanderud, *Struggle for the Street: Social Networks and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Pittsburgh* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, 2011); Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930–1970* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010); Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936–75* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2009); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006); Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL, 1994).



of thinking and acting.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing limitations has become standard practice for transnational historians, many of whom have embraced theoretical and methodological humility. Paul Kramer has critiqued the “breathless sense of freedom” that marks some transnational histories. Lara Putnam has examined the danger of digital methods that alienate globally minded scholars from local contexts. And Indrani Chatterjee has suggested the impossibility of “connected histories across spaces shaped by war and the partitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” What the Highlander tapes reveal is that many civil rights activists similarly confronted the “unavoidable challenge” of bridging the local and the global, and found in that challenge an opportunity to cultivate new kinds of solidarities in the struggle against white supremacy.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of those solidarities was an expansive conception of nonviolent civil disobedience. The history of nonviolence is often told as a triumphant narrative that reinforces a hierarchical, male-centered conception of social movements and of global history. From Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King to Lech Walesa, it is the story of great men carrying a great idea across time and space.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, scholars of Afro-Indian solidarities have offered a more complex perspective on how nonviolence was translated across movements.<sup>10</sup> A diverse array of practices and concepts, nonviolence took on different meanings in different contexts and created space for other forms of resistance—including armed self-defense. Historians have chronicled the fraught coexistence of nonviolent civil disobedience and armed self-defense within the long African American freedom struggle.<sup>11</sup> Scholarship on the

7 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005), 6, 140.

8 Paul A. Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–91, here 1380; Lara Putnam, “The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (2016): 377–402; Indrani Chatterjee, “Connected Histories and the Dream of Decolonial History,” abstract, *South Asia* 41, no. 1 (2018): 69–86. Also see Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, “Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History,” *International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 573–84; Marc A. Hertzman, “The Promise and Challenge of Transnational History,” *A Contracorriente* 7, no. 1 (2009): 305–15; Ian Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (2009): 453–74; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connolly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441–64; Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615–30; Rebecca J. Scott, “Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000): 472–479.

9 Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2016); Mark Kurlansky, *Nonviolence: Twenty-Five Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York, 2006); Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York, 2003); Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2000).

10 Sean Chabot, *Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire* (Lanham, MD, 2012); Sean Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge, 2011); Joseph Kip Kosek, “Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1318–48; Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston, 1992).

11 Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia, 2019); Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Durham, NC, 2016); James Oakes, *The Scorpion’s Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 2015); Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York, 2013); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville, FL, 2007); Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-*

anti-apartheid movement similarly reveals the complex and contingent relationship between nonviolence and the strategic use of arms.<sup>12</sup> Even the Indian independence movement, often equated with Gandhian nonviolence, involved a range of positions on the just use of violence.<sup>13</sup> Offering a window on debates that occurred throughout much of the world, the Highlander tapes contain heated conversations about the relationship between nonviolent philosophy and tactics—conversations that challenged activists to rethink their methods and their goals. “Nonviolence requires a critique of what counts as reality,” Judith Butler has written, and thus reveals “the possibilities that belong to a newer political imaginary.” Highlander’s workshops demonstrate the creative power of nonviolence—not only as a technique with which to challenge Jim Crow but also as an intellectual method of seeking new “political imaginaries” through deliberation and debate.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike pacifist organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) or civil rights groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Highlander was never committed to nonviolence. The school’s cofounder and director, Myles Horton, was a former member of FOR and helped mentor the young people who founded SNCC. Yet Horton rejected what he called the “pacifist’s philosophical commitment to nonviolence,” and Highlander remained open to a range of opinions on the ethics and efficacy of armed resistance. Such ideological openness could itself be a form of nonviolence. According to Horton, “Education per se, just the idea of education, is nonviolent.” “You can’t use force to put ideas in people’s heads,” he explained. “Education must be nonviolent.” This was more than a commonsense statement; it was an expression of Highlander’s educational philosophy. Highlander’s workshops started with the problems and ideas the participants brought

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*Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens, GA, 2005); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).

- 12 Robert Trent Vinson and Benedict Carton, “Albert Luthuli’s Private Struggle: How an Icon of Peace Came to Accept Sabotage in South Africa,” *Journal of African History* 59, no. 1 (2018): 69–96; Vinay Lal, “Mandela, Luthuli, and Nonviolence in the South African Freedom Struggle,” *Ufahamu* 38, no. 1 (2014): 35–54; Scott Everett Couper, “Emasculating Agency: An Unambiguous Assessment of Albert Luthuli’s Stance on Violence,” *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 3 (2012): 564–86; Scott Everett Couper, “‘An Embarrassment to the Congresses?’: The Silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the Production of ANC History,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 331–48; Gay W. Seidman, “Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 161–67.
- 13 Gandhi himself did not oppose violence in all cases. Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Sugata Bose, *His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Shruti Kapila, “A History of Violence,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2010): 437–57.
- 14 Judith Butler, “Judith Butler on the Case for Nonviolence,” *Literary Hub*, February 18, 2020, <https://lithub.com/judith-butler-on-the-case-for-nonviolence/>. Also see Manu Goswami and Mrinalini Sinha, *Political Imaginaries: Rethinking India’s Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022); Karuna Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Brandon M. Terry and Tommie Shelby (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 78–101; Jake Hodder, “Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence, and the Promise of Africa,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 6 (2016): 1360–77; and Chaiwat Satha-Anand, “Overcoming Illusory Division: Between Nonviolence as Pragmatic Strategy and a Principled Way of Life,” in *Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle*, ed. Kurt Schock (Minneapolis, 2015), 289–301.

with them—participants who had been selected because they had demonstrated leadership potential in local struggles. Rather than teach such students how to address their problems, Highlander staff encouraged workshop participants to learn from one another. According to one observer, “At a Highlander workshop, the poor talk; the consultants and staff talk when asked to by the poor.” Education was a creative, student-driven process in which teachers were facilitators rather than authorities. “You don’t have to know the answers,” Horton explained. “The answers come from the people.”<sup>15</sup>

Such an open-ended educational process generated the rich conversations at the heart of this essay, conversations that took place in a single wooden building on a hilltop in Tennessee yet spanned geographic boundaries.<sup>16</sup> While GIS has become indispensable to many historians, and some degree of geographical thinking remains essential to nearly every historical study, less attention has been paid to what historian Elizabeth Horodowich has called the “geographic imagination” of historical agents.<sup>17</sup> In this article, I use a range of historical sources—oral histories, newspaper accounts, and organizational documents—to trace the geographic and intellectual expansiveness of Highlander’s workshops. Highlander’s audio recordings offer the most nuanced evidence in support of my central argument—that efforts to use nonviolence against American racism challenged the borders of race and nation in ways that did not erase the gap between the local and the global but rather made of that gap a space in which to cultivate new forms of struggle. Focusing on the geographic imagination of local activists allows us to reconceive the transnational history of the American civil rights movement as a grassroots endeavor.<sup>18</sup>

15 Highlander’s pedagogy had a place for expert guests, such as Avrahm Mezerik, and workshop leaders often guided discussions more than Highlander’s philosophy of education might seem to encourage. See Nico Slate, “‘The Answers Come From The People’: The Highlander Folk School and the Pedagogies of the Civil Rights Movement,” *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2022): 191–210; Myles Horton, *The Long Haul* (New York, 1998), 23, 38, 41, 44–45; Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 13; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*; Frank Adams, “Highlander Folk School: Getting Information, Going Back and Teaching It,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42, no. 4 (1972): 497–520; “Highlander: A People’s School Where the Teachers Learn from the Students,” *Journal of World Education* 2, no. 4 (1971): 4–5, in “F.O.R. Race Relations, Southern Organizations, etc. 1955–1967, Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, TN,” series E, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

16 Most microhistories are “prismatic,” as historian Danna Agmon has put it, tracing the lines of influence that spread from a single event like a prism refracts light. Examining the geography of Highlander’s workshops allows us to link such a prismatic microhistory to the insights of borderlands history—particularly the recognition of the border as a space of both connection and disconnection—and to bring those insights into the story of other kinds of boundaries, particularly the borders of race. See Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca, NY, 2017); Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41; and Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 211–42.

17 Elizabeth Horodowich, *The Venetian Discovery of America: Geographic Imagination and Print Culture in the Age of Encounters* (Cambridge, 2018). Also see Ian N. Gregory and Alistair Geddes, eds., *Toward Spatial Humanities: Historical GIS and Spatial History* (Bloomington, IN, 2014); Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, 2003); Michael Broers, “The Myth and Reality of Italian Regionalism: A Historical Geography of Napoleonic Italy, 1801–1814,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 688–709; and Robert J. Mayhew, *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Language of British Geography, 1650–1850* (New York, 2000).

18 Many of the best works in transnational Black studies have explored how activists developed spatial conceptions of freedom in their efforts to oppose white supremacy within the United States and abroad.

By the time that UN workshop was held at Highlander in the summer of 1954, an emancipatory geographic imagination had long fueled African American struggles shaped by what the novelist Ralph Ellison called “the relationship between geography and freedom.”<sup>19</sup> In the postwar era, Highlander was one of several organizations that built on that legacy in an effort to bridge the local and the global in opposition to white supremacy. We might divide such organizations based on their primary geographical focus. Groups like SCLC, SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), while forging transnational solidarities, focused on fighting American racism. By contrast, groups like the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), the Council on African Affairs, and the International League for the Rights of Man aimed primarily at generating support for overseas causes. Such a distinction risks obscuring both the personal ties that spanned these organizations and the degree to which many civil rights activists understood local, regional, national, and international struggles as all fundamentally connected. ACOA, for example, was founded in 1953 by a group of civil rights activists associated with CORE, and was directed by the pacifist George Houser, who was equally dedicated to fighting colonialism, apartheid, and American racism.<sup>20</sup>

The literature on Highlander has focused on its commitment to local change, and scholars of the transnational dimensions of the Black freedom struggle have tended to ignore the folk school. Yet many of Highlander’s workshops reveal locally minded activists grappling with international questions—not just in regard to nonviolence but also in relation to Pan-Africanism, negritude, “colored solidarity,” the Third World, and—central to this essay—the UN. Scholars such as Carol Anderson and Elizabeth Borgwardt have chronicled the creativity, determination, and frequent frustration with which African American activists struggled to make the UN an ally in the fight against American racism. Most of the literature on ties between the UN and the Black freedom struggle has focused on lobbying within the UN itself and at the level of American foreign policy. The history of Highlander’s UN workshops offers a more grassroots perspective on efforts to link the UN and the American civil rights movement, a

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See Monique Bedasse, Kim D. Butler, Carlos Fernandes, Dennis Laumann, Tejasvi Nagaraja, Benjamin Taltan, and Kira Thurman, “AHR Conversation: Black Internationalism,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (2020): 1699–739; Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York, 2018); Blain, *Set the World on Fire*; Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, CA, 2018); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC, 2015); Carl H. Nightingale, “Before Race Mattered: Geographies of the Color Line in Early Colonial Madras and New York,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 1 (2008): 48–71; and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

19 Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York, 1986), 131. Also see Laurent Dubois, “Going to the Territory,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 3 (2020): 917–20.

20 Sheila D. Collins, *Ubuntu: George M. Houser and the Struggle for Peace and Freedom on Two Continents* (Athens, OH, 2020); Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Jan Eckel, “The International League for the Rights of Man, Amnesty International, and the Changing Fate of Human Rights Activism from the 1940s through the 1970s,” *Humanity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 183–214; James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).



perspective that is similarly charged with both hope and frustration but in different ways than the story based in Washington, DC and New York.<sup>21</sup>

In the first section of this essay, I trace the way Highlander's UN workshops cultivated a grassroots globalism that aimed to connect the UN to local action on behalf of racial integration. I argue that while the workshops helped raise awareness about the work of the UN, they failed to directly link such global awareness to local action and instead revealed the danger that a certain kind of global optimism would lead to local apathy. In the second section of this essay, I argue that it would be a mistake to focus on a narrow conception of nonviolent resistance when mapping links between global ideas and local action within the civil rights movement. By focusing on the innovative movement institutions known as citizenship schools and on the impact of Highlander on Rosa Parks, I argue that it was Highlander's radical integrationism that, by challenging the borders of race, opened a space for other kinds of border crossing. In the third section of this essay, I argue that the disconnection between the local and the global proved to be a powerful educational space in which to cultivate the self-criticism that was central to how many activists understood nonviolent resistance. In mapping the geography of nonviolence, disconnections were as important as connections, and the most ambitious global solidarities depended on humility, introspection, and what the scholar Leela Gandhi has called "an ethics of moral imperfectionism." At Highlander, civil rights activists cultivated an inclusive nonviolence, understood not as the absence of weapons but as an extension of what the scholar Charles Payne has called "a visceral humanism, a dearly bought, broad perspective on human behavior that militated against thinking about people in one-dimensional terms." The power of that humanism was tested in the summer of 1954, when interracial groups began to gather at Highlander to talk about what the United Nations might mean to them.<sup>22</sup>

On August 2, 1954, Myles Horton opened a Highlander UN workshop by telling participants that everything they discussed was "to be related back" to their own communities. "World problems are community problems and individual problems," he

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21 Carol Anderson, "From Hope to Disillusion: African Americans, the United Nations, and the Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1947," *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (1996): 531–63; Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (Cambridge, 2015); Elizabeth Borgwardt, "Race, Rights, and Nongovernmental Organizations at the UN San Francisco Conference: A Contested History of 'Human Rights ... without Discrimination,'" in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck (Oxford, 2012), 188–207. Also see Mary Ann Heiss, *Fulfilling the Sacred Trust: The UN Campaign for International Accountability for Dependent Territories in the Era of Decolonization* (Ithaca, NY, 2020); Gene Zubovich, "For Human Rights Abroad, against Jim Crow at Home: The Political Mobilization of American Ecumenical Protestants in the World War II Era," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 2 (2018): 267–90; Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, 2015); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, 2008); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Bill Sutherland and Matt Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan-African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle and Liberation* (Trenton, 2000); and Charles H. Martin, "Internationalizing 'The American Dilemma': The Civil Rights Congress and the 1951 Genocide Petition to the United Nations," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 4 (1997): 35–61.

22 Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (Chicago, 2014), 4; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 314–315.

declared. “What happens in India affects things down in Greenville, Alabama.” The reverse was also true. “What happens in Greenville, Alabama affects people in India.” According to Horton, “This two-way process means that we have to think of ourselves as citizens of the world.” To advance integration across the borders of race and nation, Horton encouraged workshop participants to embrace a grassroots antiracist globalism. He defended his grassroots globalism by arguing that American foreign policy was being harmed by domestic inequality. Echoing an argument long advanced by African American activists, he stated that “problems like segregation affect our relations with the rest of the world.” Such an argument dovetails with the Cold War civil rights thesis, the idea that American power brokers were moved to support the civil rights movement out of concern that overt white supremacy had become a diplomatic liability.<sup>23</sup> Yet Horton did not turn to the Cold War to frame his global vision. Opponents of Highlander had long used anticommunism to attack the school, which had strong ties to labor unions and socialist organizations.<sup>24</sup> Rather than frame civil rights as a Cold War imperative, Horton noted that worldwide “the majority are colored,” and yet there were no organizations in the South that would allow white people and “colored people” to meet together to discuss global problems. As a first step, Horton hoped that American organizations that focused on world problems would integrate. Such integration was the most tangible goal of the UN workshops, a goal that Highlander embodied by integrating its own gatherings despite a state law that forbade any school from welcoming students across the color line.<sup>25</sup>

Antiracist activists had long hoped that the UN would be a force against white supremacy. In 1946, the National Negro Congress forwarded a petition to the UN “on behalf of 13 million oppressed Negro citizens of the United States of America.” A year later, in October 1947, the NAACP submitted its own petition to the UN. Titled “An Appeal to the World,” the hundred-page treatise was drafted by a team headed by

23 While some historians have advanced the Cold War civil rights thesis, others have focused on the ways in which the Red Scare devastated the popular front coalitions that thrived in the 1930s and early 1940s. See James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson, 2015); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2011); Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds., *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: “Another Side of the Story”* (New York, 2009); Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 75–96; Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2007); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge, 2003); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941–1960* (New York, 2000); and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

24 In 1941, for example, Highlander collaborated with unions to host workers from Colombia, Thailand, Canada, and China. “The Year 1941, Ninth Annual Report of the Highlander Folk School,” in Highlander Folk School Part 5 of 19, p. 1, FBI Records: The Vault (website), accessed November 11, 2022, <https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%205%20of%2019/view>. Also see Nico Slate “The Radical Civil Rights Movement: The Highlander Folk School and the Legacies of the Left in Cold War America,” *Past & Present* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtac008>.

25 Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 2, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8a, TSLA.

W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1951, the Civil Rights Congress submitted a 240-page document, “We Charge Genocide,” that called on the UN to oppose the “policy of genocide against the colored people in the United States.” The State Department and other branches of the US government strove to suppress all of these petitions, and the UN would fail to live up to the hopes of antiracist activists, but those hopes remained widespread at the time of Highlander’s UN workshops in the summer of 1954. Only a few months earlier, the Supreme Court had declared in *Brown V. Board* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Southern authorities would soon embrace “massive resistance” to any threat to the racial order, but for a brief moment it seemed as if the world—and the United States—was finally turning away from white supremacy.<sup>26</sup>

Too much hope in global change could lead to apathy. Consider Avrahm Mezerik’s efforts to help integrate that Howard Johnson’s in Virginia. At the conclusion of the Highlander workshop he attended, Mezerik encouraged participants to “organize to act nonviolently.” After citing the example of Mahatma Gandhi, Mezerik declared, “An army of nonviolent people can be just as militant as an army with machine guns.” At that Howard Johnson’s, however, he chose not to court arrest. The article he wrote about the incident for the *New Republic* seemed to indicate that Jim Crow was already on its way out. One of the heroes in Mezerik’s article is another customer, a white woman, who told the integrated group, “I am very sorry that you are not being served here. Lots of us here believe it is wrong; we are working to change it as fast as we can.” The woman’s claim to be moving “as fast as we can” aligned her with many white liberals who supported integration in theory but found endless reasons for delay. Yet rather than ask what exactly the woman was doing to advance integration, Mezerik concluded, “The entire atmosphere was one of apology for segregation.” He did not call for more efforts to integrate restaurants, or for anything like the sit-ins that would spread six years later. Why take the risk of being arrested if the world was moving inexorably toward freedom? At Highlander, Mezerik had endorsed nonviolent civil disobedience, but the hope with which he viewed global affairs limited his appetite for radical action.<sup>27</sup>

Mezerik’s optimism is striking given the weakness of the UN as an institution. At Highlander, Helene Boughton, the publisher of an import/export newspaper based in Los Angeles and an avid supporter of the UN, admitted that the organization did not have “any powers of enforcement.” For Boughton, that was not necessarily a problem. She wondered “to what extent you want an international organization that may eventually evolve into a world government to be able to use force in order to deal with an aggressor.” Rather than the UN serving as a global policeman, Boughton saw the organization as a forum for discussion and debate. Neither she nor Mezerik explained how, given its limited mandate, the UN could help those fighting against Jim Crow.<sup>28</sup>

26 Anderson, “From Hope to Disillusion”; Martin, “Internationalizing ‘The American Dilemma’”; National Negro Congress, petition to the United Nations, June 6, 1946, Internet Archive, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/NNC-Petition-UN-1946>.

27 Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 7, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8f, TSLA; Mezerik, “You All Begins to Mean All.”

28 Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 6, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8e, TSLA.

On the last day of the workshop, the participants focused on how to connect their conversations about the UN to their local activism. Barbara Reynolds, an African American civil rights activist based in South Carolina, discussed the importance of communication as a tool for mass mobilization. She planned to share her knowledge and ideas with others in her community, and to ask them to “join me and help spread the word that I had spread to them.” Horton applauded her efforts and stressed “the importance of bringing people together to share their experiences.” He linked such educational gatherings to the UN and added, “You can’t talk about the UN today without talking about segregation.” By bringing together civil rights activists like Reynolds and UN advocates like Boughton, the Highlander workshop was designed to connect global solidarities to local action. “It isn’t up to us to say I’m going wait until they move in India, I’m going to wait until they move in Russia,” Horton declared. “It’s only up to us to say I’m going to move wherever I am.”<sup>29</sup>

To demonstrate how the participants in the UN workshops decided “to move” after they had returned home, Highlander released a statement detailing “discussions and projects” that grew out of the workshops. The core result, according to the press release, was that participants left Highlander knowing “that their struggles for public education and higher standards of living on an unsegregated and non-discriminatory basis were the same struggles that the peoples in underdeveloped countries were facing all over the world.” Such knowledge might provide activists with hope, yet the press release offered little evidence for the local impact of such a global awareness. As several Highlander workshops made evident, the gap between global awareness and local action was not easily bridged.<sup>30</sup>

At a workshop in July 1955, Zilphia Horton, a community organizer and musician and the wife of Myles Horton, introduced a film on a rural health initiative in El Salvador by noting that many of the dire conditions depicted in the film existed in Appalachia as well. Such a recognition could lead to a sense of global solidarity or to frustration and despair. If poor people suffered throughout the world, what hope was there for real change? During the ensuing discussion, the challenge of mobilizing communities on the local level was articulated by Septima Clark, a fifty-seven-year-old African American educator who had taught for decades in South Carolina. Clark had attended her first workshop at Highlander the previous summer. In 1956, she would become Highlander’s director of workshops after she lost her teaching position because of her support for the NAACP. “Working at the grassroots level, with the rural and unlettered black masses,” historian Jacqueline A. Rouse wrote, “Clark communicated the message that the local residents could be entrusted with the power to make decisions that impacted *their* lives and likewise could train their brothers and sisters in the struggle.” In July 1955, she had just begun to develop her long relationship with Highlander, and while she believed in the power of grassroots mobilization, she was

29 Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 8, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8g, TSLA.

30 “Statement of Discussions and Projects Which Developed out of ‘Workshop on World Problems, the United Nations and You,’” box 15, folder 13, HFSP, TSLA.



also very aware of the challenge of fostering social change in the face of poverty, violence, and state repression. In response to the film about rural health in El Salvador, Clark discussed the terrible health conditions on Johns Island, South Carolina, and noted that only a few years earlier sixty-eight African American children had died from diphtheria. What most troubled her was that the local community had not mobilized to demand health care. “There’s a group of people living in the community with 68 children who died of diphtheria,” Clark recalled, “and nobody said anything about it, nobody asked for a nurse, nobody asked for a special clinic or anything of that type—what’s wrong?”<sup>31</sup>

While Clark’s question hung in the air, the conversation broadened to the global forces that could be mobilized against poverty and racism. Taking on his usual role of workshop optimist, Avrahm Mezerik suggested that “public opinion throughout the world” had played a role in integrating the American military and in the *Brown v. Board* decision. “Integration has marched forward,” Mezerik declared. “And the reason it marched forward, and we got the Supreme Court decision was,” he argued, because “this country had as a matter of foreign policy that we didn’t discriminate.” Help came “from India. 400,000,000 people who are not white, who every time the United States says join up with us say—What are you doing about your Negro population.” By emphasizing the fact that Indians were “not white,” Mezerik echoed the transnational “colored solidarity” that African American activists had fostered for decades, but his praise of that solidarity seemed disconnected from the struggles Septima Clark had described. If the world was turning against white supremacy, why was change so slow in South Carolina? Mezerik tried to bridge the gap between his global optimism and the local struggles described by Clark. “You have 400,000,000 allies there,” he declared, “to help you on Johns Island.” As Mezerik saw it, a combination of local and global forces would come together to destroy Jim Crow. “The problem is being solved for South Carolina by what you do, certainly, by getting to vote, by putting pressure on them, by getting meetings going in those schools and by all the other things you’ve talked about,” he concluded, “but it’s also being solved by the rest of the world coming to your aid.”<sup>32</sup>

Clark did not disagree with Mezerik’s vision of local and global forces coming together, but her emphasis stayed firmly on the local. Where Mezerik saw an avalanche of progressive forces, Clark focused on the lack of local leadership. “You know, I still feel—here’s Mr. Bellinger from Johns Island—and we have lots of other men like that, who are big land owners, they pay taxes, they’re leaders in their communities,” Clark stated. “Now why can’t these men stand up, and ask for these things?” While Mezerik’s globalism gave him hope, Clark called on local people to stand up for their rights. Of

31 Highlander Workshop, July 3–9, 1955, box 15, folder 14, HFSP, TSLA; Jacqueline A. Rouse, “We Seek to Know ... in Order to Speak the Truth’: Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent—Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York, 2001), 95–120, here 116. Also see Ruehl, *A Singing Army*; Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*; Stephen Lazar, “Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom,” *Souls* 9, no. 3 (2007): 243–252.

32 Highlander Workshop, July 3–9, box 15, folder 14, HFSP, TSLA. Also see Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*.

course, there is nothing contradictory in seeing hope on the global scale while remaining focused on the need for more local action. Indeed, that balance was exactly what Highlander's UN workshops aimed to foster. Yet rather than a direct link between the UN and local activism, those workshops revealed the danger that global optimism could lead to local complacency. It was to avoid such complacency that Clark insisted on the importance of local action, but the question remained how to connect the global forces Mezerik trumpeted with the local activism that Clark demanded.<sup>33</sup>

Only three months before Mezerik and Clark discussed the gap between global progress and the persistence of poverty and racial injustice on Johns Island, delegates from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East had met at Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss the future of a postcolonial world. Five months after Mezerik and Clark's conversation, Rosa Parks would keep her seat on that bus in Montgomery. Located between Bandung and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the conversation that Mezerik and Clark shared at Highlander could be understood as a prophetic microcosm of a world moving away from white supremacy and imperialism. The Bandung Conference was widely reported in the African American press and was heralded by many civil rights activists as a sign of the crumbling of white imperial rule.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, however, it was not by gesturing outward toward the shifting landscape of a post-Bandung world that Highlander's UN workshops helped to prepare the way for the burgeoning civil rights movement. As the visit of Rosa Parks to Highlander that same summer of 1955 makes evident, it was hyper-local racial border-crossing—the integration of Highlander itself—that would inspire the spread of nonviolent social change across a range of geographic boundaries.

On September 6, 1955, a few months after Mezerik and Clark discussed the pace of change on Johns Island, a high school sophomore named Florence Singleton gave a speech to some 125 people at the Johns Island Citizens Club. Her topic was a desegregation workshop at Highlander that she had recently attended. "It was our first rewarding experience in true democracy," she declared. "There were fifty-three whites and twenty Negroes, eating, sleeping, dancing and working together every day." Such integration was paired, Singleton noted, with discussions of global politics. She told her audience, "The discussion ended with the idea that the United States has as much to learn from India and other countries as they have to learn from us." Her reference to

33 Highlander Workshop, July 3–9, box 15, folder 14, HFSP, TSLA.

34 Despite the presence in Bandung of several prominent African American figures, including the novelist Richard Wright and the New York congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and despite the way the conference was celebrated by many African American activists, Bandung remained a pageant of the postcolonial nation-state, limited by the same hyperterritorial ambitions and Cold War tensions that hampered the UN. See Carolien Stolte, "'The People's Bandung': Local Anti-imperialists on an Afro-Asian Stage," *Journal of World History* 30, nos. 1–2 (2019): 125–56; Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah, eds., *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures* (Cambridge, 2017); Quỳnh N. Phạm and Robbie Shilliam, eds., *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions* (London, 2016); Amitav Acharya and See Seng Tan, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore, 2008); Prashad, *The Darker Nations*; and Von Eschen, *Race against Empire*.

India suggested that the workshop had included discussions of Gandhian nonviolence. The impact of Highlander on Johns Island would not take the form of overt civil disobedience; by embracing radical education in opposition to white supremacy, residents of Johns Island demonstrated the power of a different conception of nonviolence.<sup>35</sup>

In the first section of this essay, I argued that Highlander's UN workshops aimed to cultivate a grassroots globalism that would link transnational solidarity with local struggles. Such a link proved elusive because of the limitations of the UN and because a certain kind of global optimism encouraged complacency rather than action. Nonviolent civil disobedience, by contrast, offered a more effective path toward connecting the global and the local in opposition to white supremacy. Yet merely talking about the global spread of nonviolence would have been fruitless if not for the fact that Highlander's workshops enacted their own form of nonviolent resistance by transgressing the borders of race. As Singleton noted, Highlander workshops were lively social affairs, in which participants not only engaged in conversations but also cooked and ate together, sang and danced together, played games, watched films, and (weather permitting) swam together. By racially integrating these activities, Highlander's leadership created a space in which other kinds of border crossing became more powerful. Analyzing the relationship between racial and geographic borders within Highlander's workshops reveals the inadequacy of simplistic models of the transnational diffusion of what Gandhi called "satyagraha," or "truth force."<sup>36</sup>

By the time he attended one of Highlander's UN workshops in the summer of 1954, Esau Jenkins had long linked truth and justice in pursuit of social change. Born in 1910 on Johns Island, Jenkins ran a family farm, operated a local bus line, worked as the assistant pastor of a church, founded and chaired a voter registration and legal advocacy organization, and served as the president of the PTA and of the Johns Island Citizens Club. At Highlander, Jenkins listened intently to the conversations about world affairs and was especially moved by the struggle against racism in South Africa. According to Avrahm Mezerik, Jenkins "was deeply disturbed that the U.N. had been able to do so little about it." He was unmoved by Cold War propaganda. At one point in the conversation, Jenkins declared, "From what was told us this morning, it doesn't seem like red china is the biggest problem it seems to be." A few months after the workshop, in September 1954, Jenkins wrote Myles Horton that he had received a summary of the workshop "on World Problems, the United Nations and You." Jenkins showed the summary to many of his neighbors and arranged for a public screening of a film on the UN—a film called *Of Human Rights*—that he had seen at Highlander. Like Florence

35 "Speech Given by Florence Singleton," box 3, folder 5, HFSP, TSLA.

36 For a critique of standard diffusion models, see Sean Chabot, "Transnational Diffusion and the African American Reinvention of Gandhian Repertoire," *Mobilization* 5, no. 2 (2000): 201–16. On the origins of the word "satyagraha," see Mahatma Gandhi, "Some English Terms," *Indian Opinion*, December 28, 1907, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 8 of 98 (New Delhi, 1999), 31; Mahatma Gandhi, "Johannesburg Letter," *Indian Opinion*, January 11, 1908, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 8:80–88; and Mahatma Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Madras, 1928). Also see Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's Integrity: The Philosophy behind the Politics," *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 79–93; Ajay Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (Minneapolis, 2016); and Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York, 1993).

Singleton, Jenkins juxtaposed the global perspective of the workshop with Highlander's own racial border crossing. "Just as soon as the United States encourages more of this tipe [sic] of Schools," he wrote Horton, "we will have less trouble teaching the rest of the world that our way of life is the world's best."<sup>37</sup>

After returning home from Highlander, Jenkins pioneered a new approach to adult education that would come to be known as the citizenship school, an approach that used innovative teaching strategies to equip African American adults to pass the literacy tests that white supremacists utilized to limit Black suffrage. With support from Highlander, Jenkins secured a building, and Septima Clark recruited her cousin Bernice Robinson to begin teaching classes. Because of the creativity and hard work of Jenkins, Clark, and Robinson, the citizenship school thrived and was soon duplicated in other parts of the South. In 1961, the program was passed on to the SCLC, the organization led by Martin Luther King. In 1965, Clark estimated that more than twenty-five thousand people had participated in the classes, and the program had led to the enrollment of more than fifty thousand new voters. Despite its impressive growth, the program remained focused on the power of local leadership and small-scale community organizing.<sup>38</sup>

It matters that the idea for such a locally based educational effort was germinated, in part, at a workshop on the UN, yet the early history of the citizenship schools reveals more disconnections than connections between the global and the local. Myles Horton later recalled that during the UN workshop, Esau Jenkins declared "that he thought it was fine to talk about the world but that he had problems at home. His problem was to get help on teaching the people on his island to read well enough to pass the voter registration requirement exam." In July 1955, Bernice Robinson wrote to Myles and Zilphia Horton that her trip to Highlander was "one of the most wonderful experiences" of her life. "Frankly speaking," she added, "selling the United Nations is all right, but I would rather sell Highlander because you are putting into action and working it out successfully the thing that the UN hasn't been able to do as yet and is merely attempting to promote and that is a more democratic way of life." Robinson started the first citizenship school class with a copy of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but she saw Highlander itself as a better example of the power of racial border crossing.<sup>39</sup>

37 Letter to Myles Horton from Esau Jenkins, September 20, 1954, box 3, folder 2, TSLA; Mezerik, "Experiment in the South," *Nation*, November 27, 1954; Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 7, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8f, TSLA; Peter Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement: The South Carolina Citizenship Education Program of the Highlander Folk School," *Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 399–422.

38 "Southern Christian Leadership Conference Citizenship Education Program, from a Taped Report by Mrs. Septima Clark, SCLC Training Supervisor at the Highlander Board of Directors' Meeting, May 14, 1965," box 22, folder 10, Schwarzhaupt Foundation Papers, University of Chicago Archives; Septima Clark, "Literacy and Liberation," *Freedomways*, 1964, Civil Rights Movement Archive (website), accessed November 14, 2022, <http://www.crmvet.org/info/cs.htm>; Deanna M. Gillespie, *The Citizenship Education Program and Black Women's Political Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021); Spencer J. Smith, "Septima Clark Yelled: A Revisionist History of Citizenship Schools," *American Educational History Journal* 46, no. 2 (2019): 95–110; David P. Levine, "The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwinning the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom," *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 388–414.

39 Bernice Robinson to Myles and Zilphia Horton, July 19, 1955, box 5, folder 5, HFSP, TSLA; Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement," 411; Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road*



It was the integration of Highlander that most impressed Rosa Parks. In August 1955, Parks attended a Highlander workshop on public school desegregation. She was already a seasoned activist, having worked for over a decade with the NAACP, but she had begun to despair of any real change. The workshop gave her new hope. “At Highlander,” she explained, “I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony.” She was “very reluctant to leave.” “I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom,” she declared, “not just for blacks but all oppressed groups.” Her emphasis on “all oppressed groups” included those oppressed in other parts of the world. In March 1956, three months into the bus boycott, Parks returned to Highlander. When asked what had motivated her to keep her seat, Parks turned not to civil rights but to human rights. “This is what I wanted to know,” she stated. “When and how would we ever determine our rights as human beings?” Parks would repeat her emphasis on human rights repeatedly in the years ahead. While historians have tracked the evolution of what Mark Philip Bradley has called the “global human rights imagination,” the relationship between that imagination and the transnational history of nonviolence remains understudied. Exploring the impact of Highlander on Parks offers a window on the geography of nonviolence, and on how figures like Parks navigated that geography.<sup>40</sup>

One way to begin the story is with the arrival at Highlander of another renowned practitioner of civil disobedience—the Indian socialist, Rammanohar Lohia. Born in 1910 in the Faizabad District of British India, Lohia fought against colonial rule as the director of the Foreign Department of the All India Congress Committee and as one of the leaders of the Congress Socialist Party. He was repeatedly imprisoned by colonial authorities. After India gained independence in 1947, he continued to use nonviolent civil disobedience to press the government to support land reform and other antipov-erty initiatives. On a month-long tour of the United States in 1951, Lohia encouraged a range of audiences to use nonviolent methods to attack racism. At Howard University, he praised civil disobedience as “a weapon of universal application” that should “be used on the race question in this country.” At Fisk University, he asked the African American sociologist Charles Johnson, “Why not a little jail going? Resist some of this injustice directly, and non-violently, and go to prison if required?” At Highlander, he

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by *Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters (Philadelphia, 1990), 67–68.

- 40 Septima Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Cynthia Stokes Brown (Navarro, CA, 1986), 17–18, 32–34; Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 153; Glen, *Highlander*, 136; Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, 2013), 35–43; Rosa Parks, interview by Cynthia Stokes Brown, November 1980, published in *Southern Exposure* (Spring 1981): 7, excerpted in Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement in Songs and Pictures* (New York, 1989), 25; “Advisory and Executive Meeting,” March 3–4, 1956, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 515a1, Wisconsin Historical Society; Mark Philip Bradley, “American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 1–21; Kenneth Cmiel, “The Recent History of Human Rights,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 117–35.



Figure 2. Septima Clark (left) and Rosa Parks (right) at Highlander in August 1955, some four months before Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Photograph by Ida Berman, courtesy of Karen Berman. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

discussed links between Indian and African American struggles and again urged his listeners to embrace nonviolent civil disobedience.<sup>41</sup>

The civil rights advocate and future US senator Harris Wofford accompanied Lohia on his journey across America and later suggested that it was the Indian firebrand who deserved credit for bringing nonviolence into Highlander's curriculum. According to Wofford, before Lohia's visit, Highlander "had nothing on Gandhi, on civil disobedience, on violence, on Thoreau, nothing at all." At the end of Lohia's visit, Myles Horton promised to "add Gandhi to the curriculum." That addition to the curriculum, Wofford argued, later inspired Parks to keep her seat on that bus in Montgomery. Lohia himself painted a more complex picture of the influence of Highlander on Parks. In an article on Highlander in his journal *Mankind*, he acknowledged that Highlander had hosted discussions on "the passive resistance movement in India" as early as the 1930s and that "the Folk School library, from its very beginning, had books and articles on Gandhi and the passive resistance movement." His understanding of the impact of the school on Parks was not limited to a narrow conception of nonviolent civil disobedience. Rather, he framed that impact as an "example

41 Lohia had written to W. E. B. Du Bois in 1936 in the hope of building "the closest relations with our Negro comrades of America." Harris Wofford, *Lohia and America Meet* (Mount Rainier, MD, 1951), 7–13, 17–18, 27, 37–39; Rammanohar Lohia to Du Bois, July 20, 1936, reel 45, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

of Highlander’s faith in people” and of its integrated workshops. “For two weeks,” he wrote of Parks, “she had lived free.” In accord with the memories of Parks herself and with the history of the citizenship schools, Lohia’s assessment highlights the power of local integration and of grassroots education. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Highlander’s efforts to bridge the global and the local. Indeed, as the workshop recordings reveal, it was by opening a space between the local and the global that Highlander’s workshops created the opportunity for activists to reimagine their own geography of nonviolence.<sup>42</sup>

In September 1957, at Highlander’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, Martin Luther King declared that the South was showing “increasing sensitivity to the force of world opinion.” He explained, “Few indeed are the southerners who relish having their status lumped in the same category with the Union of South Africa as a final refuge of segregation.” Nor did most southerners want “to be shown how southern intransigence fortifies communist appeals to Asian and African peoples.” Thus, King linked the struggle against American racism to the shifting realities of world opinion and to the Cold War. He praised Highlander as an institution and noted the impact of the school on Rosa Parks, who was in the audience. The presence of King, Parks, and dozens of other civil rights veterans at that celebration revealed that the Cold War civil rights nexus depended on another bridge between local and global struggles: nonviolent resistance. It was the civil rights crises generated through civil disobedience that made American powerbrokers worry about the “force of world opinion.” The relationship between the Cold War and the civil rights movement hinged on a kind of national self-criticism in which American leaders recognized that Jim Crow had to be dismantled if the country was to live up to its self-proclaimed status as the leader of the “free world.” It was a different kind of self-criticism that was at the center of Highlander’s anniversary celebration. In typical Highlander fashion, the celebration included a variety of workshops on how to expand the struggle against racism—workshops that suggested that if activists were to harness “the force of world opinion,” they would need to regularly question their own goals and methods. Scholars have recognized that constructive introspection was central to the philosophy of nonviolence and to Highlander’s educational methods. What has yet to be examined, and what the Highlander tapes reveal, is the way in which efforts to bridge the local and the global created unique opportunities for such generative self-criticism.<sup>43</sup>

42 In the foreword to the second edition of *Lohia and America Meet*, Lohia claimed a more direct link between his visit and the civil disobedience of Parks. See Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (Pittsburgh, 1992), 110–11; “Harris Wofford: Our Final Interview,” *Ability*, February 2019, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://abilitymagazine.com/harris-wofford-our-final-interview/>; Rammanohar Lohia, foreword to *Lohia and America Meet*, by Harris Wofford, 2nd ed. (Madras, 1961), 6; and Rammanohar Lohia, *Mankind*, box 16, folder 5, HFSP, TSLA. Also see A. J. Muste to Lohia, August 13 and August 17, 1952, subject number 86, May 1952–December 1952, Correspondence Received, Socialist Party Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

43 Scholars have recognized the centrality of self-criticism to Gandhi’s understanding of “swaraj,” a word often translated as independence but that literally means “self-rule.” See, for example, Skaria, *Unconditional*

On August 8, 1956, Fred Routh of the Southern Regional Council (SRC) told a Highlander gathering that the South could not long resist “the whole movement throughout the world today on the part of almost all people for a recognition of equal human dignity.” The SRC, a predominantly white and relatively cautious civil rights organization, was not usually associated with anticolonial solidarity. Routh defied the image of the SRC when he declared that “the whole world movement” toward the “end of colonialism” was driven by “nonwhite peoples stirring and moving and building and growing and demanding recognition of equal dignity.” An African American man in Louisiana had told Routh, “There’s a little ol’ brown man over in India, sits about this high, and he started something they call passive resistance and toppled an empire, and that’s what Montgomery means.” The description of Gandhi as “a little ol’ brown man” echoed a famous biography, *That Strange Little Brown Man Gandhi*, and the many African Americans who used Gandhi’s color to link nonviolence to decolonization. Routh told the audience that he often encountered students from Asia and Africa who asked, “If the United States is interested in leading the democratic world, what are you doing about your color problem?” Routh’s belief in the power of “the whole world movement” could lead to the kind of apathetic optimism that limited Avrahm Mezerik’s commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience. As Routh’s Asian and African students made clear, it would take sustained action to push the United States away from its racist past and toward the “recognition of equal human dignity.”<sup>44</sup>

Several visitors suggested that Highlander could play an important role in shaping foreign opinion of the civil rights movement. Stewart Meacham, a former Methodist missionary, explained that in India he was regularly asked, “What have you done to break down race discrimination in America?” If he were asked that question again, he explained, he would simply “describe Highlander.” Kwa O. Hagen, the national secretary of the People’s Education Association of Ghana, came to Highlander as an official State Department guest. An expert on adult education, Hagen later described the folk school to African audiences via Voice of America. He called the school “unquestionably a great experiment in race relations in the United States.” Yet whereas Meacham held up Highlander’s integration as an answer to questions about “race discrimination in America,” as if the integration of one school signaled the end of racism, Hagen located Highlander’s potential within the context of a long-term struggle. “And deep in their hearts,” he wrote of the activists he met at Highlander, “as their own cherished song goes, they know that they will, one day, in the rather misty future, overcome all

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*Equality*; Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s Integrity”; and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, “Self-Control and Political Potency: Gandhi’s Asceticism,” *American Scholar* 35, no. 1 (1965–66): 79–97. Also see Martin Luther King Jr., “A Look to the Future,” speech at Highlander’s twenty-fifth anniversary, September 2, 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute (website), accessed November 14, 2022, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/look-future-address-delivered-highlander-folk-schools-twenty-fifth-anniversary>, and “Highlander Folk School Hears Southern Leaders,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 11, 1957.

44 Recording of Integration Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 8, 1956, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 12d, TSLA; “Report on the Second Workshop on Public School Integration,” August 5–11, 1956, box 7, folder 8, TSLA. Also see Frederick B. Fisher, *That Strange Little Brown Man Gandhi* (New York, 1932).





**Figure 3.** May Justus (left), Kwa O. Hagen (center), and Septima Clark (right) at Highlander. The national secretary of the People's Education Association of Ghana, Hagen came to Highlander as a guest of the State Department. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

the prejudices and let the two races in American society live together on a footing of perfect equality and harmony.” His emphasis on “the rather misty future” indicated a healthy skepticism regarding the pace of change, a skepticism that many civil rights activists shared. Yet Hagen’s very presence at Highlander also gave reason for hope. Like Rammanohar Lohia and the unnamed student from India who attended the first UN workshop at Highlander, Hagen demonstrated the breadth of Highlander’s connections with organizations, movements, and activists across the United States and abroad.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The song *We Shall Overcome* links Highlander’s local and global histories. Brought to Highlander in 1946 by tobacco workers from Charleston, South Carolina, the song was revised and popularized by Zilphia Horton, Pete Seeger, and Guy Carawan, and is now sung throughout much of the world. Ruehl, *A Singing Army*, 147-154; Victor V. Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome: Essays on a Great American Song* (New York: Rowman

While the geographic breadth of Highlander’s visitors created new opportunities to link the local and the global, the workshop conversations themselves reveal the persistent challenge of making such links productive of real change. In May 1960, three months after sit-ins swept across the South, Highlander hosted a group of young activists from Nashville. The group included Marion Barry, the national chairman of SNCC, the most important organization to emerge from the sit-ins. Barry discussed how students approached the managers of local department stores to talk about the sit-ins. “This is off the record,” they would say. “We just want to talk, man to man.” Such casual conversations could yield important logistics for the sit-in campaign. From such local tactics, the conversation quickly shifted to the global. “It’s so urgent for America’s sake,” an unnamed activist added, “because as a democracy we are, it seems to me, we are in a big hurry to win the minds and hearts of the people, the uncommitted people of the world.” Refusing to combat Jim Crow was the equivalent of letting “Russia or somebody else win the commitments of all the people.” Most conversations about the impact of the Cold War on civil rights would end with a similar statement, linking American foreign policy to the end of Jim Crow. But this workshop included Anne Braden, the veteran civil rights activist and champion of free speech. Braden agreed that the Cold War civil rights reasoning was “valid and rational.” “But I have a great distaste,” she added, “for the extent to which the improvement in Negro–white relations in this country gets argued for” as if “it were a tactic of the Cold War.” She found such a link “very distasteful.” Braden challenged the young activists to critically assess their methods and the way those methods were framed within the context of domestic and international Cold War politics.<sup>46</sup>

The following day, Rosa Parks built on Braden’s criticism of the Cold War civil rights nexus by locating the movement in a different global context: the struggle for world peace. When “we eliminate legal segregation and discrimination and work together,” she declared, “we could maybe begin working together for peace, world peace.” The ultimate goal of the movement, she suggested, was not just to end segregation but to “do away with war.” Like Braden, Parks challenged participants to be both ambitious and humble in their approach to the global dimensions of the movement. They needed to recognize that achieving integration in the United States would be only one step toward building a world beyond war and oppression, and they needed to examine their own methods and the implications of their methods both locally and globally.<sup>47</sup>

In November 1960, another Highlander workshop revealed the importance of balancing humility and ambition when linking national and international forms of integration. One of the featured speakers was the Reverend George “Ed” Riddick, an African

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& Littlefield, 2014); “Quotes from Foreigners,” box 6, folder 9, TSLA; Highlander Reports, twenty-ninth annual report, October 1, 1960–September 30, 1961, box 14, folder 12, TSLA.

46 “The White Southerner in the Current Struggle,” Recording of a Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, May 26, 1960, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 40e, TSLA. Also see Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

47 “The White Southerner in the Current Struggle,” Recording of a Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, May 27, 1960, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 40i, TSLA.

American civil rights activist based in Chicago. Riddick declared that the old world order had been typified by “the stories of Kipling, that East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” That way of thinking had been vanquished “when Gandhi told us that there was a new world arising over the horizon, when Martin King assured us that 57,000 Negroes know that we will no longer live in a world that is simply a neighborhood but demand to live in a world that realizes itself as a brotherhood.” Nonviolence was for Riddick, as for Gandhi and King, not just a tactic to achieve a particular end but a philosophy of interconnection across the borders of race and nation. “We’re not just responsible for ourselves,” Riddick declared. “We’re responsible for Nyerere in a place like Tanganyika,” as well as for decolonial and antiracist struggle in Kenya, South Africa, and elsewhere. After encouraging civil rights activists to support anticolonial and antiracist struggles throughout the world, Riddick returned to the Cold War civil rights nexus to suggest that foreign opinion could shed light on American racism in the North as well as in the South. Many foreign observers asked, he reported, “You’re so good, you preach freedom and democracy and everything like that, how come a Negro can’t live on the north side of Chicago?” It was not just southern Jim Crow that was a Cold War liability.<sup>48</sup>

After Riddick concluded his comments, the conversation shifted to Black Nationalism and global conceptions of “colored solidarity” in a way that underscored the importance of critically assessing the ultimate goals of the movement. A workshop participant recalled hearing the famed sociologist Robert Park declare in Louisville in 1939 that soon “all the darker peoples of the world will control the social order.” Now, the participant explained, he saw it happening. “The next social order will be controlled by the darker peoples of the world,” he said. After Riddick cited the Biblical promise that “Ethiopia shall stretch forth its hand,” a different workshop member asked, “Do you really believe in your heart that black supremacy is inevitable?” “No,” Riddick clarified, the goal was not for the “darker races” to gain power in order to oppress others, but to fight for a world beyond oppression. “We don’t have to exchange one form of tyranny for another,” he declared.<sup>49</sup>

In a geographic leap, Septima Clark then returned the conversation to the local struggle and to very personal forms of humility and reconciliation. She chided herself for going to downtown Nashville to shop and then taking a cab across town to eat rather than challenging Jim Crow in department store restaurants. Why had she waited for college students to take the lead with the sit-ins? A young man responded, “I don’t think you should look at it like that.” “People like you,” he told Clark, “have made it possible for people in my generation to make our contribution.” Clark refused to excuse her

48 “Report on the Civil Rights Act of 1960 and Training of Citizenship School Teachers, 1960,” 515A/48, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society. On the Northern dimensions of the civil rights movement, see Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, editors, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

49 “Report on the Civil Rights Act of 1960 and Training of Citizenship School Teachers, 1960,” 515A/48, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

own inaction. “I can’t help but think that living here I didn’t protest against that type of thing,” she explained. Her young champion replied, “You protested in a different manner.” “Even in the days of slavery,” he recalled, there were many ways that African Americans resisted. By locating himself and Clark within a long lineage of African American resistance, the young man strove to relieve Clark of her guilt for not sitting in. Although she shared the young man’s broad vision of the movement, Clark responded by emphasizing the necessity of self-criticism and humility. “As long as I have been teaching and I taught for many years,” she recalled, “I could always look back and find something that I didn’t do ... I never felt satisfied with myself.” As she had in previous workshops, Clark moved the conversation from a sweeping discussion of global affairs to an intimate focus on the need for self-criticism and individual action—in this case, her own. Whether confronting a segregated lunch counter in Nashville or supporting anticolonial movements in Africa, the urgency of change should not obscure the importance of introspection.<sup>50</sup>

In 1954, Avrahm Mezerik told the participants in a Highlander UN workshop to “organize to act nonviolently” and to follow Gandhi in forming “an army of nonviolent people.” No one knew—nor could they have known—that just such a nonviolent army would soon take to the streets throughout the South. Even after Mezerik offered a defense of civil disobedience, the conversation remained hypothetical until another workshop participant interjected. “We’re breaking the law right now actually in this room,” she pointed out. “It’s against the law in the state of Tennessee for us to meet here interracially.” Myles Horton quoted the Tennessee law that “Negro and white shall not be taught in the same classroom,” and another workshop participant joked, “We’re not being taught here. We’re just discussing.” The room erupted with laughter. They knew they were doing more than discussing, but what exactly were they doing? What were they learning? And to what end? Their laughter speaks to their courage in defying state law, as well as to the anxiety that must have resulted from participating in such an illegal workshop when the end result remained unclear.<sup>51</sup>

Highlander’s efforts to connect local and global struggles—and, in particular, to bring nonviolent civil disobedience across national and cultural borders—depended on transcending the most treacherous boundary in the Jim Crow South: the color line. Talking about nonviolence in an integrated setting was itself an act of nonviolent civil disobedience, an act that brought the school into direct conflict with segregationist authorities. In 1959, local officials raided the school and arrested Septima Clark. A few years later, after a state-led investigation and two high-publicity trials, the school’s charter was revoked and its land and buildings were confiscated. In response, Myles Horton declared, “You can padlock a building, but you can’t padlock an idea. Highlander is an idea ... You can’t kill it and you can’t close it.” The idea of Highlander was

50 “Report on the Civil Rights Act of 1960 and Training of Citizenship School Teachers, 1960,” 515A/48, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

51 Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, August 7, 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8f, TSLA.



that open-ended, nonhierarchical conversations could help empower local people to create change. The UN workshops—focused on global events and featuring experts like Avrahm Mezerik—diverged from Highlander’s central philosophy. Yet as those workshops revealed, confronting the gap between the local and the global could, like Highlander’s commitment to integration, create space for new kinds of thinking and acting, particularly in regard to the power of nonviolence.<sup>52</sup>

African Americans had debated the relevance of Gandhian nonviolence since the 1920s. Black pastors like Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, both mentors of Martin Luther King, had established their own deep appreciation of Gandhian nonviolence. After meeting Thurman in India in 1936, Gandhi declared, “It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.” Yet it was not the “unadulterated message of nonviolence” that was debated at Highlander’s workshops. The nonviolence that was discussed at Highlander was an ambiguous, multifaceted, and complicated—one might even say “adulterated”—blend of the international legacy of nonviolence with local traditions of resistance. That blend did not erase the gap between global forces and local struggles. Indeed, it was the disconnections between the global and the local that helped to foster the action-oriented self-criticism that was at the core of nonviolent struggle and of Highlander’s approach to education.<sup>53</sup>

Although civil disobedience had long been employed in the Black freedom struggle, ideas of nonviolence did not spread easily within African American communities accustomed to the necessity of armed self-defense. Consider the testimony of Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely, an African American civil rights activist, born in Pittsburgh and raised in Harlem, who recalled going to Highlander “for training in nonviolence.” According to Preacely,

Black folks in these areas had to overcome years and years of thinking of another way to embrace nonviolence. There were people who thought we were crazy and

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52 John Egerton, “The Trial of the Highlander Folk School,” *Southern Exposure* 6, no. 1 (1978): 82–89; “Probers’ Queries Backfire Often,” *Nashville Tennessean*, February 7, 1959, box 31, the Trial of Highlander (1978)—Research and Background Materials—Articles (Newspaper Articles about the Trial), John Egerton Papers, Vanderbilt University Archives; Myles Horton, “Confidential Memo to 300 Friends of Highlander,” October 6, 1961, box 16, folder 10, HSF-TSLA; Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932–1961* (New York, 1989), 294; “Gov. Griffin Hit for ‘Demagoguery’ toward Highlander,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 25, 1957; “Integration Study Sparks Highlander School Attack,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 1, 1958; Trezzvant W. Anderson, “Georgia Education Commission Called Most Vicious Dixie Group: First in a Series,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 28, 1957.

53 Mahadev Desai, “With Our Negro Guests,” *Harijan*, March 14, 1936; Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT, 2018); Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT, 2015); Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*; Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman’s Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston, 2011); Chabot, *Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement*; Dennis C. Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930–55,” *Church History* 74, no. 2 (2005): 217–35; Allison Calhoun-Brown, “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 168–74; Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet*.

said, “What do you mean, ‘turn the other cheek’? You know the white man is evil. Why do you want to embrace him? Why don’t you want to fight back?” Several people told me, “Honey, I am not getting rid of my gun.” Actually, Mama Dolly had a rifle and a shotgun, and she knew how to use them. When we slept at night, we felt somewhat protected. It was ironic and ambiguous all at the same time.

Many civil rights activists shared such an “ironic and ambiguous” relationship with nonviolence. Unlike Highlander’s gatherings, many of the workshops on nonviolence held by civil rights organizations offered a more deliberate curriculum focused on convincing participants to embrace nonviolence both tactically and philosophically. Perhaps the most important example of such workshops were those run by the Reverend Jim Lawson in Nashville. It would be a mistake to draw too sharp a line between the kinds of conversations and learning that occurred in Nashville and those at Highlander. For one thing, Lawson and many of his students came to Highlander to participate in workshops. Yet it is important to distinguish between “social movement schools” that aimed to propagate a particular method or philosophy, whether nonviolent or otherwise, and those like Highlander that encouraged students to fully engage the “ironic and ambiguous” nature of nonviolent social change.<sup>54</sup>

While the Highlander tapes demonstrate that such ambiguity could be generative, they also reveal persistent doubts regarding whether methods that might have worked abroad could be employed in the struggle against American racism. Such doubts mirrored the skepticism with which many civil rights activists came to view the UN. Even the most ardent UN boosters recognized that the organization was limited in its ability to oppose American racism. By the mid-1950s, many globally minded policymakers had rejected hard forms of racial hierarchy, yet their thinking often failed to recognize the ways in which the status quo reproduced structural and institutional forms of racism. As historian Or Rosenboim has argued, “The proponents of the globalist discourse struggled to reconcile the universalizing and the pluralistic aspects of their visions of world order, which thus collapsed sometimes into a defense of Western moral and political values.” At Highlander, by contrast, the geography of nonviolence was mapped in opposition to the status quo and as a means of democratizing power.<sup>55</sup>

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54 Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, IL, 2010), 169–70. Also see Larry W. Isaac, Anna W. Jacobs, Jaime Kucinskas, and Allison R. McGrath, “Social Movement Schools: Sites for Consciousness Transformation, Training, and Prefigurative Social Development,” *Social Movement Studies* 19, no. 2 (2020): 160–82, and Larry W. Isaac, Daniel B. Cornfield, Dennis C. Dickerson, James M. Lawson Jr., and Jonathan S. Coley, “‘Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement,” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 34, no. 1 (2012): 155–84.

55 Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 10. Also see Andrew Preston, “The Limits of Brotherhood: Race, Religion, and World Order in American Ecumenical Protestantism,” *American Historical Review* 127, no. 3 (2022): 1222–251; Benjamin Siegel, “The Kibbutz and the Ashram: Sarvodaya Agriculture, Israeli Aid, and the Global Imaginaries of Indian Development,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1175–204; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019); Manu Goswami, “Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–85; Jeanine M. Canty, ed., *Globalism and Localization: Emergent Solutions*



Figure 4. Participants in a Highlander workshop discussing the World Federation of Trade Unions. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Highlander’s history troubles the idea of the civil rights movement as an affirmation of American democracy, and subverts the equation of nonviolence with civility. Scholars of civil disobedience have challenged limited notions of civility— notions still deployed to discipline protesters of color—and have used the global history of decolonization to frame the American civil rights movement as, in the words of the scholar Erin Pineda, a “decolonial praxis.”<sup>56</sup> Many Highlander staff members and workshop participants envisioned a radical transformation of American society—in the North and West as well as the South—and connected that vision to a global commitment to decolonization and human rights. In 1961, for example, echoing her fellow activist, Ella Baker, a longtime friend of Highlander, Septima Clark defined the purpose of the movement as “not a cup of coffee, not a hamburger, not a view of a movie but the

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*to Ecological and Social Crises* (New York, 2019); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY, 2015); Manfred B. Steger, James Goodman, and Erin K. Wilson, *Justice Globalism: Ideology, Crises, Policy* (London, 2013); Etsuko Taketani, “The Cartography of the Black Pacific: James Weldon Johnson’s *Along This Way*,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 79–106; and Manfred B. Steger, *The Rise of the Global Imaginary: Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror* (Oxford, 2008).

56 Erin Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Eraldo Souza dos Santos, “Seeing Civil Disobedience Like a State,” *The Philosopher* 110, no. 1, <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/seeing-civil-disobedience-like-a-state>; Candice Delmas, *A Duty to Resist: When Disobedience Should be Uncivil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Guy Aitchison, “(Un)civil disobedience,” *Raisons Politiques* 1, no. 69 (2018): 5–12; Robin Celikates, “Democratizing civil disobedience,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42, no. 10 (2016): 982–994.

greater goals promised to every human being.” In 1963, Clark wrote Myles Horton, “We need to think about taxes, social welfare programs, labor management relations, schools, and old age pensions.” Beyond merely ending racial segregation, Clark aimed “to organize a community with the help of the people in the community,” “to reach the power structure,” and to achieve “true equality [and] true freedom for all men.”<sup>57</sup>

It was not easy to “reach the power structure”—to bend the Cold War in opposition to Jim Crow, or to rethink the global in opposition to poverty and inequality. The challenge for Highlander participants was, in the words of scholar Robbie Shilliam, “to redeem the possibilities of anti-colonial solidarity between colonized and (post)colonized peoples on terms other than those laid out by colonial science”—to build a new world from within spaces shaped by the legacy of slavery and colonialism.<sup>58</sup> How could those opposed to empire and white supremacy reclaim the global from those who were building a new world order that reproduced old inequalities and injustices? By connecting the struggle against Jim Crow to the work of the UN, Highlander’s workshops were designed to link new kinds of global thinking to equally new forms of local resistance. As the history of the UN itself makes clear, the path from intentions to results is long and winding, and although Jim Crow faced threats from abroad in the era of decolonization, both racism and imperialism would find fertile ground in the new world order.

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57 Clark to Dorothy Cotton, March 19, 1961, Folder 3, Box 38 and Clark to Horton, September 24, 1963, Folder 12, Box 9, both in Highlander Research and Education Center Records, Wisconsin Historical Society. Also see Ella Baker, “Bigger Than a Hamburger,” *The Southern Patriot*, May 1960; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

58 Scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of Black Geographies have laid bare the relationship between the legacies of slavery and colonialism and contemporary inequities of space and place—from the carceral state to the national border. See Jovan Scott Lewis, *Violent Utopia: Dispossession and Black Restoration in Tulsa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022); Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Elleza Kelley, “Follow the Tree Flowers’: Fugitive Mapping in *Beloved*,” *Antipode* 53, no. 1 (January 2021): 181-199; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (Minneapolis, 2006). Also see Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 11.