Fourteen

THE ROUGH DRAFT OF HISTORY

Just as people as workers have no voice in what they make . . .
so do people as producers of meaning have no voice in what the
media make of what they say or do, or in the context in which the media
frame their activity. . . . The processed image then tends to become
"the movement" for wider publics and institutions who have few
alternative sources of information.

TODD GITLIN
The Whole World is Watching

The first paragraph of Richard Kluger's remarkable history of the
1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation reads:

Before it was over, they fired him from the little schoolhouse at
which he had taught devotedly for ten years. And they fired his wife
and two of his sisters and a niece. And they threatened him with
bodily harm. And they sued him on trumped up charges and con-
victed him in a kangaroo court and left with a judgment that de-
nied him credit from any bank. And they burned his house to the
ground while the fire department stood around watching the flames
consume the night. And they stoned the church at which he pas-
tored. And fired shotguns at him out of the dark. But he was not
Job, and so he fired back and called the police, who did not come
and kept not coming. Then he fled, driving north at eighty-five
miles an hour over country roads, until he was across the state line.
Soon after, they burned his church to the ground and charged him,
for having shot back that night, with felonious assault with a deadly weapon, and so he became an official fugitive from justice.2

The passage refers to the Reverend Joseph Albert Delaine, who in the late 1940s led the Blacks of Clarendon County, South Carolina, in their fight for the equalization of school facilities, a fight that became one of the cases addressed by Brown v. Board of Education.

Brown is the kind of Big Event upon which journalists and historians have generally concentrated. By beginning his discussion not with the Event itself but with the people at the bottom of the process—not with lawyers or presidents or judges or civil rights organizations—Kluger makes it clear that the Big Event grew out of a tradition of struggle, that much of the historical initiative was in the hands of the socially obscure, that they were willing to face enormous repressive powers in order to change their world, that the leadership that led to Brown was very much a collective leadership, some of whom lived only because they took for granted the right to armed self-defense. He conveys a sense of what may be the central theme of the community-organizing tradition—that people who think they matter, might. Media coverage of the movement—overwhelmingly sympathetic and a crucial part of the movement’s success—was seldom able to capture those themes. The Reverend Delaines were invisible to the media. Journalists refer to themselves as doing the rough draft of history. In this case, rushing to tell the story, they missed much of its substance.

In his analysis of media coverage of the New Left, Todd Gitlin explains media “framing” as the principles of “selection, emphasis and presentation” that determine what gets defined as news.3 The frames used to cover the civil rights movement were multiple and shifting, but they were always such as to obscure the organizing process. One of the persistent movement criticisms of the national press corps—the very idea of a “national press corps” grew partly out of the movement—is that the press focused on big, dramatic events while neglecting the processes that led to them. Paul Good, an ABC reporter in the early 1960s, thought that the focus on events was largely due to competition among understaffed networks, which led to
a policy of crisis reporting, moving on a story as it boiled up, quickly dropping it the moment its supposed public interest had died and racing off to a newer crisis. . . . Our procedure crimped perspective and often substituted the superficial glance for the needed long look.4

Thus Good spent much time interviewing a Black Alabama family about their motives for sending their son to an integrated school over the protests of a howling mob, but that was the kind of background story there was seldom interest in running. A rock-throwing mob would be more likely to attract attention than the motivations of the people being thrown at or those of the mob itself. Similarly, Mary King, who worked in SNCC’s communications office, recalls that in the fall of 1963 organizer Frank Smith was very excited because in his area of Mississippi local adults, as opposed to youth, were beginning to play a larger role. From an organizer’s viewpoint, this is a pivotal moment in the process, but it was hardly the kind of thing the press deemed important. “Part of the difference,” King wrote, “about what was important and what was not lay in the difficulty the news media always face when confronted with a process rather than an incident.”5

The inability to convey a sense of process meant that much of what the movement was could not be presented. The media generally seem to have been surprised by Black Power, suggesting they did not have a very clear sense of how the thinking of people in the movement was changing. The emphasis on what Joyce Ladner calls the “Big Events” instead of process is particularly distorting from SNCC’s viewpoint.6

The questions SNCC was raising about the nature of leadership and how leadership potential might be developed, the sheer persistence of organizers, the continuity of 1960s organizing with that done in earlier years, the questioning of the basic premises of American society—none of these were likely to become a key part of the story as framed by the press, and partly for that reason they never became a part of collective consciousness about the movement in the way that the “Big Events” did. Editors and reporters could be quite rigid in their conceptions of
what constituted the story. By 1964, when Paul Good was trying to interest his editors and producers in background pieces on the Atlanta sit-ins, he found them uninterested:

I received the impression that they were weary of civil rights stories, they were in basic sympathy with the [progressive] image Atlanta presented, and they did not want or need any analyses of current black-white attitudes or projections of how these attitudes could affect the course of the civil rights story in the days ahead. Their attitude was that clear when you cleared away the evasions.7

Any incident involving violence, according to Good, was more likely to be considered a story. In 1962, Sheriff Laurie Pritchett of Albany, Georgia, earned a southwide reputation as the man who had whipped Martin Luther King by meeting nonviolence with nonviolence, at least in public. As expected, the press did lose interest in the Albany Movement. Later, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, adopted the same tactics, with the same reaction from the press. Nick Von Hoffman, of the Chicago Daily News, quotes one magazine cameraman who had been given marching orders by his editor:

Know what my picture editor told me? He said the Klan didn’t scare him and that I should get a shot of them burning a cross in front of a Negro’s house. Says he’d like the Negro on his knees begging and the Klan should have their pillow cases . . . and in color yet.8

Similarly, historians Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn claim that the wire services, with their dependence on formula writing, “contributed to the fixation on violence, and the amoral tendency to view a profound moral crisis in the South in cliche perspective, so that it came to seem like a baseball game, complete with box scores of broken heads.”9

In order to play, the story had to be packaged with violence or with white involvement or with the involvement of nationally known celebrities. Where violence was present, the press could be counted on
to be more attentive, but that didn’t mean that they would convey the messages the movement wanted conveyed. Despite enormous coverage of the Schwerner-Chaney-Goodman killings, Rita Schwerner, Mickey’s widow, felt that “the news media had, in general, not used her numerous statements and the tapes she had made because she refused to be maudlin, sentimental, or tearful and had instead tried to discuss the [political] issues involved.” Watters and Cleghorn, referring to Greenwood during the turmoil of the spring of 1963, wrote: “In Greenwood, there was the whole basic constitutional issue and one police dog. The nation noticed the latter.”

No one should doubt that the nation did notice the violence and was repulsed by it. David Garrow’s careful analysis of reactions to the Selma and Birmingham campaigns leaves little doubt that violence, especially if photographed, moved both average citizens and congressional decision-makers. However salutary it may have been for the passage of civil rights legislation, however, the focus on violence bore its own costs by discouraging the development of a more complex understanding of the movement and its evolution.

Paul Good thought that all but a few of the journalists coming into Mississippi for the 1964 Summer Project came in wanting to collect stories of “violence, police brutality, volunteer heroism, Negro suffering.” Good felt that such stories were necessary but did not convey all that needed to be conveyed. A couple of years later, on the Meredith March, Good found that the sought-after theme was dissension among civil rights groups. “I once saw them [a group of newsmen] shoot from the truck like flushed quail when two marchers almost came to blows.” There was no interest in the fieldhands they were passing who were making three dollars a day.

There was a natural tension between editors back in New York and reporters in the field. Even at the liberal Reporter, Good found “editors who never left Madison Avenue but thought they had the southern (and northern) racial situations down cold.” One of the stories he submitted on Selma was altered by the editors to make it appear that “militant” blacks had forced “moderates” to knuckle under, which had not been the case at all “but Reporter editors—and they were not alone—loved to highlight supposed black militant-moderate contro-
versy.”¹² It would appear that the *only* time intraracial relationships became a part of the story, as far as most editors were concerned, was when they involved squabbling among the perceived leadership.

An argument over what constituted news led to Paul Good’s leaving ABC. Immediately after the Schwerner-Chaney-Goodman disappearance, Good wanted to stay at the scene while one of his out-of-state editors wanted him to go back to Jackson in order to get a statement from the governor, in the time-honored tradition of defining anything a public official says as news. In the course of the argument, Good, who had had several similar run-ins with his supervisors, both resigned and got fired.

The 1961 killing of Herbert Lee in McComb was pivotal in shaping the world view of Mississippi-SNCC. The boldness of the assassin, the timidity of the federal government, its failure to protect witnesses, its possible involvement even in exposing those witnesses to danger, the weak reaction from the media—taught organizers just what Black life—especially life that was poor and Black and southern—was really worth. Much of SNCC’s organizing was a response to their assumption that national institutions, including the press, were more interested in what happened to whites than to Blacks. The press had shown little interest in the mock elections that SNCC was running in Mississippi in the fall of 1963, but when white volunteers—the students from Yale and Stanford—came, the elections became a “story.” Freedom Summer, of course, was predicated on the idea that privileged white volunteers would bring the concern of the nation with them. The unprecedented media coverage of the summer concentrated not on local Blacks or experienced organizers but on the volunteers. That surprised no one in SNCC, but it was nonetheless embittering because it reflected the same underlying disregard for Black people that had made it possible for the nation to ignore the murders of Herbert Lee and Louis Allen.

The last movement assassinations to embed themselves fully in popular memory were the Schwerner-Chaney-Goodman killings in the summer of 1964 and the killings around Selma in 1965—Mrs. Liuzzo, the Reverend Daniels, Jimmie Lee Jackson, the Reverend Reeb. There were in fact later killings, but they received little atten-
tion. In Mississippi there were at least four movement-related killings in 1966 and 1967. In June 1966, during the Meredith march, a group of Natchez klansmen calling themselves the Cottonmouth Moccasin Gang decided that by killing a local Black person they might lure Martin Luther King to the area where they intended to assassinate him. The victim they chose was sixty-seven-year-old Ben Chester White, an inoffensive plantation caretaker with no activist history at all. Three men picked White up at his home, drove him to a secluded area, and shot him, dumping the body in a creek.

In contrast to White, Wharlest Jackson, also of Natchez, was an activist, treasurer for the local NAACP, and he was an employee of Armstrong Rubber. In 1967, responding to pressure from civil rights groups, Armstrong began opening jobs that had been reserved for whites. It was rumored that any Blacks accepting such positions would be killed. Jackson nevertheless accepted a job as a chemical mixer which got him a raise of 17 cents per hour. George Metcalf, the local NAACP president, who had barely survived a bombing of his car, impressed on Jackson the importance of regularly checking his truck for explosives. One evening in February, three weeks after he had started the new position, Jackson clocked out of work at 8 P.M. There was a pouring rainstorm. Given the weather, he may have failed to check the truck. In any case, a time-delay bomb went off as he was driving home, killing him.

Ben Brown of Jackson also had an activist history. A teenager at the time of the 1961 Freedom Riders, he took part in protests against the treatment of the Freedom Riders and subsequently organized boycotts against discriminating businesses and worked on voter-registration campaigns before becoming a full-time worker for the Delta Ministry, a spiritual successor to SNCC. By the spring of 1967, he was settling out of activism, newly married, expecting his first child, and working as a truck driver. On May 10 and 11, Jackson State students were demonstrating against police activity on their campus. Brown, for once, was not part of the demonstration. On the 11th, he went out to get a sandwich for his wife, and he had to walk by the demonstration. Some of the demonstrators threw rocks and bottles at the police, who responded by firing on the crowd. Brown was hit by
a shotgun blast. Police refused to let anyone help him as he lay bleeding on the sidewalk. He died the following day, his twenty-second birthday.

Vernon Dahmer's death may have carried the heaviest weight of symbolism. President of the Hattiesburg NAACP since the early 1950s, mentor to the Ladner sisters, supporter of Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes when they first came to Hattiesburg, Dahmer was a prosperous farmer and businessman and the father of eight children (see Chapter 2). In 1966, in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, he continued to push Blacks to vote. Over the radio, he offered to collect poll taxes for anyone uncomfortable about going to the courthouse, and to pay poll taxes for anyone who couldn't afford to do so. The night of the broadcast, his home was shotgunning and firebombed. Dahmer returned the gunfire while his family escaped. His home and nearby store were destroyed, his ten-year-old daughter was badly burned, and his own lungs were scorched. From his hospital bed, he continued to urge people to register: "People who don't vote are deadbeats on the state." He died in the hospital. Three members of the White Knights of Mississippi were eventually convicted.13

These stories are not lacking in drama or human appeal. The people involved were just not socially significant. It is also true that the frame for race-relations stories by 1966 was shifting elsewhere—to the North, to the new militants, to the riots. The irony is that part of what underlay the new anger was cumulative frustration with the societal undervaluing of Black life. There was never a time when the simple deprivation of constitutional guarantees or the murders of Black activists were enough to seize and hold national attention.

There is no reason to believe that personal prejudice within the press corps played a major role in shaping patterns of coverage. Southern dailies naturally gave the movement either slanted coverage or none. When something happened outside one of the larger metropolitan areas, the national wire services were ordinarily dependent on local reporters, who tended to share local sentiments and edited their material accordingly, which often meant that allegations of antimovement violence never got to the wire services. (SNCC learned to have their Friends of SNCC chapters around the country call their local
Still, so far as the national press corps is concerned, there is little reason to believe that personal prejudice in any simple sense determined how the story was presented, this despite the fact that a number of the most visible reporters covering the South were native southerners—Turner Catledge, Claude Sitron, and John Popham of the New York Times, Roy Reed of the Arkansas Gazette and later the New York Times, Karl Fleming of Newsweek, Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times, Reese Cleghorn of the Detroit Free Press and the Atlanta Journal.

In 1987 the University of Mississippi, of all places, held a symposium called “Covering the South,” bringing together many of the journalists who had covered the movement. In the course of the symposium many stories were told about individual struggles to overcome inbred prejudices. The fact that the southern-born reporters had to fight through some of these issues in their personal lives may even have had a positive impact on their work (though one could see how it could also lead to the self-congratulatory condescension of the newly reformed). In any case, the collective image of the movement created by these journalists was overwhelmingly sympathetic, particularly prior to 1964.

Racial prejudice is only one form of condescension. Journalists, clearly very proud of their own racial liberality, might reflect elitist views in other ways. Paul Good found coverage of SNCC’s 1964 Challenge at the Democratic National Convention patronizing and ill-informed, which he attributed partly to arrogance and partly to a subjective identification with the establishment. NBC’s Chet Huntley, according to Good, delivered himself of the opinion that the Mississippi Democratic Party was “entirely open to Negroes.” Journalists seemed to favor acceptance of the compromise offered by the White House and seemed to find SNCC’s demonstrations out of place. John Scali of ABC asked one FDP woman:

“Ma’am, now that you’ve made your point, don’t you think it would be best to leave? We don’t mean to advise you. . . .”

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"I intend to stay here as long as I can," replied the woman, who did not mean to be advised. "Till someone comes in to carry me out."

Scali later asked another demonstrator, "Do you think by sitting here in this manner you will be dramatizing your case?" ABC's Bill Downs also trivialized the protest, remarking "The educational factors of sitdowns, are, I suppose, questionable. But they get a lot of attention." In the print media, FDP's refusal to accept the compromise was widely seen as a clear sign of political immaturity, which of course journalists were quite competent to judge in the Mississippi context. Overall, with the exception of CBS, Good thought the convention coverage had a tendency to

patronize the Mississippi Negro insurgents, to assume that commentators' judgments carried a certain sophisticated superiority over the judgments of these well-meaning, morally motivated, but rather childishy stubborn Negroes. These people had something vital to say about the American democracy, its philosophy and practice; but power and hoopla carried the day.¹⁵

However much they struggled against racial prejudice within themselves, I would think that most of these men still found it hard to take seriously the idea that uneducated southern Blacks could be important political thinkers and actors. They could more easily be sympathetic than respectful.

The undervaluation of the leadership role played by ordinary people corresponded to an overconcentration on the role of national leaders, Dr. King in particular. In 1963, when SCLC was about to announce the accords that had been reached with the power structure in Birmingham, it was decided that Fred Shuttlesworth, by far the most important local leader, should speak first at the press conference. The national press corps had hardly assembled to hear Fred Shuttlesworth. "Although Shuttlesworth announced the terms of the settlement, the reporters would not be satisfied until they heard it from
King himself, as most of their readers knew nothing of Shuttlesworth.\textsuperscript{16} Anyone who wanted to understand Birmingham should have known Shuttlesworth. A Baptist minister, he had been the center of the struggle against white supremacy in Birmingham during the 1950s. In 1956, he was an officer in the local NAACP when the State of Alabama declared it illegal. Shuttlesworth's response was to organize the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights which used both mass direct-action protests and lawsuits to attack discriminatory hiring practices, segregated public facilities, segregated transportation, and segregated schools. His personal courage was legendary. He survived the bombing of his home Christmas night, 1956, announcing "I wasn't saved to run." He was given a thorough beating with chains and brass knuckles, and his wife was stabbed when they tried to wade through a mob to enroll their children in a white high school. His church was bombed again.\textsuperscript{17} He had his enemies among Black leaders in Birmingham, but his dramatic courage had won him a loyal following among ordinary people, a factor that played a role in SCLC's decision to come into Birmingham. In deciding that Shuttlesworth was not a part of the story, the press missed an opportunity to learn something about the historical depth of the struggle and the variety of leadership styles that sustained it.

At the 1987 symposium on civil rights journalism, Jack Nelson opened the proceedings by referring to Dr. King as having "launched the civil rights movement." As an explanation for how the movement began, that borders on the useless, and it suggests again how unsophisticated journalists were about the political dynamics of the 1950s South. Most reporters were hampered by their own backgrounds. With few exceptions, white journalists, southerners included, did not come from backgrounds that would have allowed them to know much about political activity in Black communities since World War II. They would have known little about the activist generation symbolized by Amzie Moore and Steptoe and Gus Courts and Shuttlesworth. Unfamiliar with that history, the 1960s movement itself and King in particular seemed more a qualitative break with the past than was in fact the case. At the same time, it is likely that many journalists felt more comfortable dealing with the well-educated
King, a man so much like themselves, than with many local leaders. Additionally, King and SCLC fulfilled an important function for the press, providing one place they could go to and get the movement perspective. King’s leadership was certainly not a media creation, but the media certainly enhanced his role.18

King played another kind of symbolic role as well. In Symbols, The Newsmagazines, and Martin Luther King Richard Lentz analyzes the use of King as normative icon, tracing the coverage given his career by three major newsmagazines.19 While he restricted himself to the South and refrained from sticking his nose into American foreign policy (White Folks’ Business), Time and Newsweek were generally laudatory and used King as a symbol to counter more militant spokespersons. U.S. News and World Report, on the other hand, treated him as a dangerous demagogue until the day he died, after which it too started holding him up as the standard more militant Blacks should emulate.

Comments made by journalists at the “Covering the South” meeting suggest that some of them are aware, at least in retrospect, that Dr. King’s role was expanded. Callie Crossley, who searched media film archives in connection with the “Eyes on the Prize” documentary on the movement found that the archives of national broadcasters had little footage on anything but King, not even John Lewis’s speech at the March on Washington. There was almost nothing on SNCC prior to the mid-sixties and the advent of Black Power. Before that, stories tended to be told as if SCLC were the movement standard.

John Herbers (UPI, New York Times) allowed that perhaps the media had covered national leaders too much, but it was hard not to in the case of a figure like King, a figure who simply drew attention to himself like a magnet. He acknowledged that a more diffuse coverage might have been better but was not sure it was possible under the circumstances. Similarly, Marianne Means (White House correspondent for the Hearst newspapers) noted that we have to communicate with symbols, and King became the symbol of the movement. In general, I left the symposium with the feeling that the reporters there had some sense of the discrepancy between what they were reporting and what was going on but could not easily conceive of having done it differently. One might point out that other social movements—mod-
em feminism and the labor movement included—have in fact been covered by the press in ways that did not imply they had a single central leader.

Reporters varied among themselves, of course. According to Mary King of SNCC’s communications office, Claude Sitton was among the reporters most respected within the movement, not least because of his willingness to take seriously stories most reporters ignored, including the discovery of five Black bodies in the river near Natchez in late 1963. SNCC believed them to be terror killings, but only Sitton and a few others showed any interest at all. It may be too pat an explanation, but King believes that after Sitton’s car was vandalized while he was attending a 1963 mass meeting in Georgia his “coverage lost the distant, flat quality of most news reportage of the time and leaped to life.”

Sitton was also among the few who consistently filed stories about local people like E. W. Steptoe, and one of the few, along with Roy Reed of the New York Times, who did not join in the general practice of treating segregationists as the objects of friendly derision.

In the fall of 1961 in McComb a group of determined high-school students decided to have a protest march despite the fact that it looked like the march would be met with violence. Bob Zellner, relatively new in town, decided reluctantly and at the last minute that if the kids were going to put their lives on the line, he had to go too. Twenty-five years later, looking back at old newspaper clippings, Zellner found that the New York Times had described him as the leader of the march. What that reflects, he says, is the assumption that if a white man is around, he must be in charge. That kind of assumption is an example of what Gitlin calls the “tacit little theories” that are embedded in media frames. Despite their sympathy for the movement and their frequent displays of courage in getting the story out, those most involved in interpreting the movement to the world were often unable to see beyond their own background assumptions. Their collective tendency to frame the story in terms of Big Events, in terms of what white people did, in terms of traditional leaders and organizations, in terms of what happened after 1955, in terms of southern backwardness, in terms of violence—nonviolence, replicated biases of race, gender and class, and relegated to secondary importance the themes that
would have been important from a community-organizing perspective.21

The roots of that perspective are deep and complex, and it would be unfair to expect reporters suddenly caught up in the movement to fully understand them. One strand of those roots was the generation of leadership that came out of World War II hungering for freedom and willing to take enormous risks to see it come about. It was they who groomed the youngsters of the Emmett Till generation to think of themselves as the vehicles of change, who created the social and political networks that later activists could exploit, who set the standards by which later activists would judge themselves, and who offered those later activists family and a tempering humanism.

Those younger organizers themselves became important models of courage, but that represents only the most visible part of their work. We have to remember that they immersed themselves in their communities—Bob Moses liked to call them deep-sea divers—learning those communities from the inside and developing relationships in which people learned to care about one another as individuals in ways that cut through issues of ideology and social status, militating against the tribalism that worked so much evil in the later movement. We have to remember how much of themselves they invested in learning, slowly and painstakingly, how to help other people recognize and develop their own potentials. We have to remember their persistence and their willingness to do the spadework, the undramatic, actual work of organizing.

The philosophic roots of the movement reach farther back than World War II, farther back even than the thinking of Ella Baker or Septima Clark. Much in SNCC’s early style—its celebration of the potential of ordinary men and women, its desire to valorize as many voices as possible, its rejection of individual celebrity, its striving for consensus, its disdain of credentials and hierarchy—reflected, in the words of SNCC’s Casey Hayden, the “old SNCC axiom that everyone is as valuable as everyone else.”22 The Black South had its own expressions of that axiom. If contemporary Black youth think at all about the elaborate rituals of courtesy that meant so much to their grandparents, they are likely, I am afraid, to find in them a symbol of servil-
ity. That is, they reduce courtesy to what they think it meant for relations *between* the races, ignoring the equally important question of what it meant inside the race. They are not likely to understand it as one part of a code of conduct which helped an oppressed people give back to one another some of the self-respect the racial system was trying to squeeze out of them, a profoundly democratic tradition holding that every man and woman, merely by virtue of being that, is entitled to some regard. Similarly, the expansive sense of family, the predisposition to see whatever is positive in people, the emphasis on character rather than wealth, are all egalitarian traditions, as empowering as anything SNCC ever devised. The ability to affirm the moral worth of even the most hateful, to look at the oppressor and think without irony “There but for the grace of God go I” affirms our ultimately equivalent moral status, even in the face of evidence that seems to contradict it.

The correspondence between the ethos of SNCC and deeply rooted egalitarian themes from the folk culture of the Black South is hardly accidental. Ella Baker and Septima Clark were born into turn-of-the-century southern Black communities, scarcely a generation removed from slavery, and they knew all the faces those communities could present. They were intimately acquainted with their destructive elements—the petty status-striving, the internalized self-hatred of which it was an expression, the parochialism. In their different ways, they tried to shape a style of social action, as Miss Baker might call it, that took those weaknesses into account but built on the communal strengths with which they were also intimately acquainted. The young activists of the 1960s trying to work within the organizing tradition were bringing back to the rural Black South a refined, codified version of something that had begun there, an expression of the historical vision of ex-slaves, men and women who understood that, for them, maintaining a deep sense of community was itself an act of resistance.