
SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress

Author(s): Tanisha C. Ford

Source: *The Journal of Southern History*, AUGUST 2013, Vol. 79, No. 3 (AUGUST 2013), pp. 625-658

Published by: Southern Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23795090>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Southern History*

JSTOR

SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress

By TANISHA C. FORD

ON THE BALMY MORNING OF AUGUST 28, 1963, OVER 250,000 PEOPLE converged on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to make history at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Participants poured through the cramped streets of the nation's capital to hear speeches from Daisy Bates, John Lewis, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as musical entertainment from leftist folksingers like Odetta, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. The excitement and anticipation were palpable as a group of young women and men called the SNCC Freedom Singers took the stage before the massive crowd to sing a few of the songs that brought them encouragement while on the front lines of the civil rights movement. Performing at the March on Washington—the largest, most highly publicized event in the history of the black freedom struggle—was a monumental opportunity to bring exposure to the efforts of the young women and men of various races and classes who composed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).¹

Seasoned student activist Anne Moody, from rural Mississippi, was one who sang on that now historic day. Moody recalls that she “reluctantly” followed the other Mississippi delegates onto the stage, when “[d]uring a break in the entertainment [they] were asked to come to the podium and sing freedom songs.” Her hesitation stemmed not from fear of singing before a large crowd but from the fact that she “was the only girl from Mississippi with a dress on. All the others

¹ I am using SNCC as broadly representative of the collective of civil rights organizations that worked together in the struggle for black liberation. Thus, many of the women I discuss in this article moved among the organizations that SNCC coordinated with, like the Congress of Racial Equality, the Nonviolent Action Group, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Because these organizations worked so closely together, their memberships were not often sharply distinguished. I am grateful to Laila Amine, Stephen Berrey, Purnima Bose, Claude Clegg, Anne Delgado, Karen Dillon, Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, and the anonymous readers at the *Journal of Southern History* for their helpful comments on drafts of this essay.

Ms. FORD is an assistant professor of women, gender, sexuality studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

THE JOURNAL OF SOUTHERN HISTORY
Volume LXXIX, No. 3, August 2013

were wearing denim skirts and jeans.”² Moody’s realization that she was overdressed compared with her denim-clad peers speaks to an understudied aspect of SNCC’s history. In the short time between SNCC’s formation in 1960 and the 1963 March on Washington, a style aesthetic that celebrated the clothing of African American sharecroppers had clearly emerged among SNCC women.³

This article explores why young black women activists abandoned their “respectable” clothes and processed hairstyles in order to adopt jeans, denim skirts, bib-and-brace overalls, and “natural” hair—hair that had not undergone heat or chemical treatments. Why did they make these choices, and what does their journey reveal about SNCC’s radical brand of activism, intraracial class politics, and youth culture more broadly? Examining the experiences of several SNCC women, including Anne Moody, Debbie Amis Bell, and Judy Richardson, I argue that women’s modification of clothing and hairstyles was, initially, a response to the realities of activism; however, as the months and years progressed, natural hair and denim became the so-called official SNCC uniform. The women used the uniform consciously to transgress a black middle-class worldview that marginalized certain types of women and particular displays of blackness and black culture. Therefore, changes in SNCC women’s clothing represented an ideological metamorphosis articulated through the embrace and projection of real and imagined southern, working-class, and African American cultures. Denim clothing became what I term a “SNCC skin,” attire that SNCC members believed had the potential to unite the young activists with the working-class members of the communities they helped organize. Moreover, the women used the SNCC skin to advance their own women-centered agenda that redefined the roles women could and would play in the movement, on their college campuses, and in society. In the context of the early 1960s, the SNCC

² Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York, 1968), 275.

³ There is a growing literature on college women’s experiences related to beauty, fashion, and the body. See Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York, 2002); Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930* (Baltimore, 2003); and Karen W. Tice, *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life* (New York, 2012). See also Karen W. Tice, “Queens of Academe: Campus Pageantry and Student Life,” *Feminist Studies*, 31 (Summer 2005), 250–83; and Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, Md., 1998), esp. 44–49, 118–22. My work draws on this scholarship and considers the cultural and political implications of movement life and youth cultures for black women. I have revisited many of the autobiographies and memoirs of college-aged women who were active in SNCC in the early 1960s to consider new ways that dress, fashion, and beauty were used as performative political tools in the early years of the civil rights movement.

uniform must be seen as more than an adornment to cover the body; it was a cultural and political tool deployed to create community and to represent SNCC's vision for a new American democracy. Though women used the SNCC skin in progressive ways, denim had differing, often competing meanings for SNCC members and for other activists. Untangling this complex history of denim reveals an interesting politics of dress that offers a new lens on the early civil rights movement.

Though denim was adopted by both men and women, I contend that activism presented different realities for women, which necessitate a gendered reading of SNCC women's embrace of sharecropper clothing. By focusing on the ways that hair and beauty factored into black women activists' lived experiences on the front lines of the movement, this article illuminates how physical and emotional torment prompted them to abandon certain elements of the model of "respectability" that their families, elder activists, and school administrators expected them to uphold. SNCC women developed their sisterhood through the creation of a shared aesthetic that involved cutting one another's hair, wearing little or no makeup, and espousing the clothing of the laboring class. In doing so, many SNCC women aimed to desexualize their bodies, not only to protect themselves from sexual assault, but also to blur prescribed gender roles and notions of feminine propriety. Yet SNCC women were rarely featured in the media wearing their denims, obscuring the central role such clothing played in creating SNCC's radical democratic vision of a raceless and classless social order, which denim overalls came to represent. Therefore, by highlighting SNCC women and their aesthetic values, this article situates their narrative within a larger history of 1960s-era youth rebellion and the demands for equal rights, cultural and political autonomy, and freedom of expression made by the burgeoning New Left.⁴

⁴While scholars of SNCC have convincingly argued that the organization's political strategies appealed to northern white student activists and provided the basis for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), less attention has been paid to SNCC women's interactions with the bohemian factions of the New Left, particularly in settings that were outside the South. Van Gosse looks beyond the SDS to define the New Left as a "movement of movements" that included the black freedom movement, feminist movement, gay rights movement, and free speech movement. As a result, he opens the door to include cultural movements such as the folk music revival, the black arts movement, and the hippie movement in New Left and youth culture studies. See Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York, 2005), 1–8 (quotation on 5). Gosse's monograph is part of a growing body of literature that focuses on SNCC's connections to the New Left, such as Wesley C. Hogan's *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill, 2007). Such works are rethinking the southern black freedom story to illustrate the established links between SNCC and white student activists in the North, a relationship that involved not simply white students traveling south but also SNCC members traveling north.

In 1960 a wave of student protest rippled through the South as critical masses of black women and men integrated lunch counters in stores such as Woolworth's and Davison's. From Greensboro, North Carolina, to Rock Hill and Orangeburg, South Carolina, to Nashville, Tennessee, to Atlanta, young, black, college-educated women from institutions like North Carolina A&T College, Claflin College, Fisk University, and Spelman College courageously faced the heckling and blows of white segregationists who ardently refused to relinquish the power that white supremacist ideologies bestowed on them. Among these civil rights activists were Debbie Amis Bell, Diane Nash, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Anne Moody, women who assumed prominent leadership roles in the months to come. Wanting to harness and develop the students' political and social intellect without diluting their youthful fervor, senior activist Ella Baker planned a meeting at her alma mater, Shaw University (the first black college in the South), in Raleigh, North Carolina, to rejuvenate the student-led movement that had begun to disband after the first round of sit-ins. Having spent years in conflict with the black male leadership of various civil rights organizations, Baker understood firsthand the need for change. And, more important, she realized that the students needed the freedom to craft their own activist ideologies without the heavy-handed guidance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), whose members were mostly black ministers. Held April 16–18, 1960, Baker's retreat at Shaw provided the space for student protesters to design a core set of values, principles, and tactics. From this meeting SNCC was born.⁵

SNCC emerged at a time when discussions about the efficacy of the politics of respectability were at their peak. According to historian Danielle L. McGuire, as the quest for citizenship rights intensified in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, the performance of respectability became a critical aspect of the black organizing tradition. After *Brown*, segregationists formed White Citizens' Councils to uphold white supremacy, delegitimizing African Americans' cries for citizenship by attacking the moral character of black women in particular. As a result, black women emphasized the outward display of their respectability in order to withstand

⁵ Author's interview with Debbie Amis Bell, June 14, 2011, tape recording in author's possession; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 239–72; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, 1964), 16–39.

attacks against their characters and against those of black men and black children. Although they were often denied prominent leadership roles within civil rights movement organizations, many women activists believed that, through their clothing choices and their adherence to the politics of respectability, they played an important performative role in the black freedom struggle. Leaders of the major civil rights organizations asserted that dressing “modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church” was a crucial part of the route to freedom.⁶

The relationship between the image of modesty and the injunction to dress as if one were attending church dated back at least to the nineteenth century. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls black women’s adherence to this brand of womanhood the “politics of respectability,” or the pursuit of racial uplift through upholding Victorian notions of womanhood. Along with speaking standard English, reciting biblical scriptures, and knowing how to correctly set a table and pour tea, this performance of respectable behavior was also achieved through the clothes black women wore and the way they styled their hair.⁷ After the collapse of slavery, northern missionaries Harriet Giles and Sophia Packard in 1881 founded Spelman College—originally named Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary—in Atlanta, Georgia, to serve as a moral training ground for former

⁶ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, 2010), 76–77; Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress Modestly, Neatly . . . As If You Were Going to Church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (paperback ed.; New Brunswick, N.J., 2004), 69–100, esp. 96n1. This advice on dress was given to students Vivian Malone and James Hood before they registered for classes at the recently integrated University of Alabama in 1963. Stokely Carmichael recalls that admonitions about dressing neatly and behaving politely were part of the training he received as a member of the Nonviolent Action Group. Carmichael’s other key lessons included having a clear strategy, researching one’s opponent, being “focused and uncompromising on principle but . . . creatively flexible on tactics,” and maintaining a sense of humor. See Stokely Carmichael, with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York, 2003), 148.

⁷ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 14–15; Lowe, *Looking Good*, 40–42; Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 6–9. See also Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette, and Performance* (Carbondale, Ill., 2000), chap. 1. For more on the politics of respectability and black women’s activism, see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999).

bondwomen and their daughters, whom whites had deemed inherently immoral. Possessing, embodying, and performing the brand of womanhood that institutions like Spelman and other black colleges across the South espoused became a way for black women to publicly articulate their moral aptitude in order to lift African Americans and women out of the depths of racist and sexist stereotypes that portrayed them as heathens lacking an acceptable moral code. Black women activists and educators such as Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper used the black press to define respectability on their own terms. As a photograph of four black women on the steps of Atlanta University (Spelman's neighboring campus) at the turn of the twentieth century suggests, respectable college coeds wore clothing that covered much of the body, like long skirts or dresses and long-sleeved blouses, in simple colors or prints (Figure 1). Gloves, hats, and post earrings were common accessories that lent a sense of refinement and sartorial elegance. Women's hair was straightened and neatly pulled into buns or French twists. As black women moved further from slavery and into the interwar period, notions of respectability evolved but remained central to the curriculum at historically black



Figure 1. Four African American women seated on the steps of a building at Atlanta University, Georgia, ca. 1899–1900. *Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., LC-USZ62-114272.*

colleges, to black religious ideologies, and to black women's activist strategies.⁸

Like their predecessors, African Americans activists in the early years of the civil rights movement purposefully constructed the movement as based in the black church and rooted in histories of black respectability. This approach made black ministers the natural leaders of the movement and the arbiters of black morality, though it was often church- and clubwomen who spearheaded early protests and boycotts. Using Christian rhetoric helped African Americans in the movement depict segregationists as amoral and ungodly and, thus, poor citizens. By maintaining dignity and Christian values, even against the brutality of police billy clubs, attack dogs, and water hoses, African Americans aimed to expose the savagery of both white segregationists and segregation itself as it denied "well-behaved" African Americans their full citizenship rights. Religious movement rhetoric also reflected long-standing intraracial class tensions, as the black middle class sought to set the standards by which they could uplift the black community as a whole, even as they used markers of respectability to distance themselves from the poor and working-class African Americans whom they, like whites, perceived as unkempt.⁹

Given African Americans' conscious employment of respectability as a political tool, it is no coincidence that these principles of respectable dress, hygiene, and etiquette were reinforced in women-centered spaces such as charm schools and college campuses. In the 1950s there was an increase in the number of charm schools for black

⁸ Lowe, *Looking Good*, 57–61; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 39–40; Tice, "Queens of Academe," 252; Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville, Fla., 2007), 44–47, 51–53, 61–69. Evans presents a compelling history of the ways black women in pursuit of higher education challenged racial and gendered norms and stereotypes within the academy. Historian Stephanie M. H. Camp offers a fascinating analysis of how enslaved women used clothing as a form of resistance, expressing what she calls their "third body," or the body used for pleasure and leisure. See Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 60–68 (quotation on 68). On Cooper and Wells, see also Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York, 2007); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York, 2009); Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 2008); and Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2001).

⁹ McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 76–77, 88; Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, "Dress Modestly, Neatly . . . As If You Were Going to Church," 76–77, 92–93 (quotation on 93); Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York, 1997), 42–44. For more on the history of the politics of respectability and racial uplift, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

women—supplementary to their college training—designed to teach proper hygiene, posture, beauty care, domestic skills, and personal style.¹⁰ And while styles changed over the mid-twentieth century—black college women’s hemlines became shorter and their hair was allowed to hang loose—there remained a clear sense of what respectable attire was; it included items like stockings, cardigan sweaters, skirts and dresses, pearl necklaces, and modestly heeled pumps. Though black college coeds were encouraged to be civic-minded and professional, they were to do so while maintaining a healthy respect for authority and for their male heads of household. These class, civic, moral, and gender standards were all to be communicated in the performance of church-endorsed modesty and middle-class aesthetics.¹¹

The emphasis on respectability performed through wearing one’s “Sunday best” and neatly pressed hair created a complicated body politics for young women activists. Movement leaders and many of the students heralded the “respectable” body as the most politically effective for a young activist to possess because this body was a direct affront to Jim Crow—era depictions of black womanhood. The student activists “projected a safe, middle-class image that played well before the news cameras.”¹² The respectable body was the visible answer to the derision of white segregationists who sought to mar black women’s persons in an attempt to enforce the color line. The perceived political efficacy of the respectable black female body led young black women activists to invest political and aesthetic value in their Sunday-best appearance. SNCC women not only used their adorned bodies as physical blockades against the indignities of Jim Crow, but they also used that sartorial strategy to transgress the social hierarchy of the South that relied on dress as a marker of one’s social status. Because African Americans were supposed to be at the bottom of the social order, dressing nicer than whites was an act of defiance.¹³ As well-dressed black women sat at lunch counters throughout the South, they created collective political and aesthetic power, which, coupled with their direct-action, nonviolent tactics,

¹⁰ Malia McAndrew, “Selling Black Beauty: African American Modeling Agencies and Charm Schools in Postwar America,” *OAH Magazine of History*, 24 (January 2010), 29–32; Barbara Summers, *Skin Deep: Inside the World of Black Fashion Models* (New York, 1998), 26–27. See also “Prison Charm School,” *Ebony*, 15 (January 1960), 75–78.

¹¹ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 57; Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, “‘Dress Modestly, Neatly . . . As If You Were Going to Church,’” 93.

¹² Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 113.

¹³ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 173–76.

presented a two-pronged attack on segregation. White segregationists, who were often the same age as the student protesters, responded by assaulting the young women who sat defiantly at lunch counters—dressed in their finest, with their hair neatly coiffed—with food and drinks.

In her autobiography Anne Moody recalls her first sit-in at Woolworth's in Jackson, Mississippi, in May 1963, when she was viciously attacked by a group of white patrons. Moody, a black woman named Pearlana Lewis, a black man named Memphis Norman, and later two white women activists—the petite, blonde Tougaloo College student Joan Trumpauer and a Tougaloo professor named Lois Chaffee—among others, attempted to subvert Woolworth's segregation policy by integrating the lunch counter. As the group sat down, and as the white customers became aware of the group's intentions to integrate the lunch counter, the scene turned hostile and violent. The women were pummeled with “ketchup, mustard, sugar, [and] pies” by an angry group of whites, mostly male high school students who were close in age to Moody and her comrades. Moody, who was wearing a dress, stockings, and closed-toed pumps, was dragged across Woolworth's by her hair, which she had painstakingly straightened and curled, and she lost her shoes in the struggle. The other women suffered a similar fate. Tougaloo College officials intervened to rescue the protesters from the violent mob, which had swelled in size after news spread about the events at the store.¹⁴

After such protests, black women like Moody and Lewis had to undergo intense hair and beauty regimens to restore their respectable bodies. Being seen in public with food and aqueous condiments plastered

¹⁴ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 235–40 (quotation on 238); M. J. O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Jackson Woolworth's Sit-In and the Movement It Inspired* (Jackson, Miss., 2013). Anne Moody's outfit was common attire for students during the early sit-ins. Historian Cynthia Griggs Fleming notes that the men often wore suits, or blazers with dress slacks, and the women wore blouse and skirt combinations or dresses, with stockings and pumps. See Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 57. The mob at the Jackson Woolworth's was predominantly male, but it was common for white women to join in the violence. Ruby Doris Smith Robinson's sister, Mary Ann Smith Wilson, recalls a sit-in protest in 1960 at a Woolworth's in Atlanta where a waitress threw a Coke bottle at Ruby Doris's head. See Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 57. For more on the history of activism between black and white women, see Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York, 2006), 19–49; and Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2005), which examines black and white women's efforts to form alliances across racial and class lines. For more on white women's reasons for participating in the civil rights movement, see Constance Curry et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, Ga., 2000).

in their hair—which began to “turn” back to its kinky state—was emotionally overwhelming for black women who had been trained since childhood never to go out with their hair unstraightened. These young activists had been taught, at home and at their institutions of higher learning, to feel and project self-dignity through their grooming routines. Given the history of racist and sexist stereotypes that linked black women’s immorality to a perceived “unkempt” appearance, these teachings held significant meaning for young black women. Moreover, many black Americans equated feminine beauty with straight hair, light skin, and conservative fashion, considering these physical attributes signifiers of strong moral character. Thus, for some black women, going out without their hair pressed connoted ugliness, social unruliness, Africanness, and even manliness. The constant washing—which stripped much-needed moisture from black hair—and the often painful hair-straightening process that were required to maintain the respectable look damaged hair follicles and caused much mental and physical anguish. Yet, with every well-pressed dress and perfectly coiled tendrils of hair, black women were fighting to retain their dignity and their political agency.¹⁵

The trip to the beauty salon was a critical part of the movement experience for black women activists in the early 1960s. After a barefooted, food-covered Anne Moody accompanied movement leaders back to the local office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), her first priority was to go to a beauty shop to get her hair washed and straightened. “Before we were taken back to campus,” she writes, “I wanted to get my hair washed. It was stiff with dried mustard, ketchup and sugar. I stopped in at a beauty shop across the street from the NAACP office. I didn’t have on any shoes because I had lost them when I was dragged across the floor at Woolworth’s. My stockings were sticking to my legs from the mustard that had dried on them.”¹⁶ Though in her account in her autobiography Moody does not offer a specific reason why she first wanted her hair redone, her decision was clearly about something much more significant than the vanity of an image-consumed college coed. As historian Tiffany M. Gill argues, beauty shops had long been

¹⁵ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.; New York, 2000), 89. Collins notes that little black girls sometimes sang a chant that reflected their perceptions of color: “Now, if you’re white, you’re all right, / If you’re brown, stick around, / But if you’re black, Git back! Git back! Git back!”

¹⁶ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 239.

places of refuge and sisterhood for black women, and during the civil rights movement these spaces came to have an even “greater significance.” Women activists used the beauty shop as a space to organize and mobilize other women. Through the experiences of Anne Moody and other student activists, we can see how the salon also played an emotionally supportive role in black women’s lives. It was through the restorative act of being made up that young black female activists located a community of women who could assist in the dignity-rebuilding exercise they needed after being demoralized by angry segregationists.¹⁷

While black women were using beauty shops to combat the emotional effects of their activism, police and city officials’ tactics for punishing and containing student activists became more sophisticated, and the threats against women’s bodies became more violent and more psychologically and sexually degrading. In June 1963 Anne Moody, SNCC field secretary Dorie Ladner, and several other women were arrested for their participation in a march in Jackson held in honor of slain Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Moody remembers that twenty women were locked in a police paddy wagon that could seat only ten people for over two hours. As if being confined in an overcrowded police vehicle on a one-hundred-degree summer day were not torturous enough, the arresting officers turned on the heating system to intensify the heat and humidity. Trapped inside the manmade inferno, the women struggled to breathe, sweat covered their foreheads, and their perspiration likely caused their straightened hair to kink up. Beads of sweat quickly became pools of moisture that drenched the women’s clothing and exposed their undergarments. The heated paddy wagon perhaps served as a way for officers to circumvent rules that prevented them from conducting body searches on women. While men were patted down and searched in jail, women often were not, as Moody recalls, in large part because it was deemed inappropriate for male officers to search female arrestees and there were few female officers. Purposefully soaking their captives’ bodies

¹⁷ Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana, 2010), 98–99 (quotation on 99). For more on beautician activists, see Tiffany Melissa Gill, “‘I Had My Own Business . . . So I Didn’t Have to Worry’: Beauty Salons, Beauty Culturalists, and the Politics of African-American Female Entrepreneurship,” in Philip Scranton, ed., *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America* (New York, 2001), 169–94. For an international perspective on the politics of beauty shop culture, see Purnima Bose, “From Humanitarian Intervention to the Beautifying Mission: Afghan Women and Beauty without Borders,” *Genders*, 51 (2010), http://www.genders.org/g51/g51_bose.html.

in sweat could reveal the leisure items like transistor radios and playing cards that women had learned to stuff in their undergarments for entertainment purposes during their long jail stays, and thus give the officers probable cause for a body search.¹⁸

Such gendered harassment exposed everything beneath the women activists' wet clothes. With bras and panties made visible to male arresting officers, women feared the response that their near-nakedness and image of sexual availability could arouse in the guards. Indeed, SNCC women had heard the stories that passed through movement circles of white male officers peering in on showering arrestees and even sexually assaulting them. Atlanta SNCC worker Norma June Davis recounted that in her jail cell, after her first arrest in 1961, a white male guard raped a young woman in the middle of the night in the bed beneath her. Hearing the woman's muffled screams as the guard violated her body made the night excruciating for the other imprisoned young women, who felt powerless to stop the rape and help the victim. Sexualized arrest tactics created fear and emotional damage different from physical assault with food and condiments. Sexual vulnerability would have been just as terrifying, if not more so, as the physical attacks of angry white mobs, even for the strongest and most seasoned activists.¹⁹

While SNCC was using notions of respectability to create a progressive approach to nonviolent activism, members found that maintaining the respectable body was difficult. SNCC women often participated in multiple protests, sit-ins, or freedom rides each week, which made the process of beautification emotionally and financially taxing. Of those early days of SNCC, Atlanta field secretary Debbie Amis Bell, from Philadelphia, remembers, "You see a lot of pictures, particularly of young women, with [skirts and petticoats] and bobby socks, which is totally unreasonable if you're going to go on a demonstration."²⁰ Bell and other women began to realize that modifications to the respectable dress code might be necessary.

¹⁸ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 249–51. Ruby Doris Smith related that the time spent in hot, humid jails made her hair "awful." She also described being strip-searched at Parchman, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, after being arrested during the freedom rides. Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 77, 173 (quotation), 86–87.

¹⁹ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 244, 249–51; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 65–66. Davis did not act to stop the rape of her bunkmate; however, the next day she demanded to speak to the warden, threatening to publicize the conditions of the jail. The warden promptly replaced the male guards with women. For more on sexualized violence against black women in the civil rights movement era, see McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; and Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, 1999), chap. 3.

²⁰ Bell interview.

The growing awareness that pumps and dresses were unreasonable attire coincided with immense changes within SNCC's membership and its political tactics as 1961 approached. SNCC leaders started rethinking the political efficacy of the black respectable body and the middle-class ideologies that undergirded it. Black women were a critical part of this discussion, and they helped create a SNCC ethos that took into account the gendered realities of activism for women. The result was a new look that was vastly different from the Sunday-best attire of the late 1950s.

Once SNCC women left college campuses and urban cities such as Atlanta to head into rural places like McComb, Mississippi, their outlook on activism and the role of the respectable body evolved. SNCC's McComb voter registration project, which required SNCC members to canvass rural communities to find people brave enough to challenge discriminatory voting laws, provided a model for activism that the organization modified and developed over the course of the early 1960s. Before McComb, SNCC members were mostly student representatives from various campus organizations. For the McComb project, SNCC brought in field secretaries, many of whom had dropped out of college to devote themselves full-time to SNCC. Of SNCC's twenty-four members when the McComb project launched in July 1961, only six had been to the organization's founding meeting in Raleigh over a year before, which meant that there was a tremendous amount of new energy and talent added to the burgeoning group. According to historian Clayborne Carson, in 1961 "the SNCC staff included the most militant and dedicated leaders of the southern student movement." The distance from the SCLC also gave the young activists autonomy to craft their own ideologies, perhaps feeling less bound to the suggestions of the organization, which had guided the young people in the early years of the sit-ins.²¹

The beginning of SNCC's campaigns in the rural South coincided with the moment that the organization started using the term *revolutionary* to describe its members and aims. SNCC's goal was not to overthrow the government but to step outside previously defined methods of activism in order to achieve freedom for all African Americans, regardless of class. Debbie Amis Bell's sentiments about SNCC and its use of freedom songs speak to the group's emerging

²¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 19–30, 45–55 (quotation on 50).

militant characteristics: “There’s a saying that ‘we are soldiers in the army,’ which we used to sing, and I think that characterizes exactly our identity.” Such imagery suggests that SNCC women like Bell believed they were called into battle to fight for the freedom of the black community. It also symbolized their belief in the power of a collective body. Like an army, SNCC needed a new uniform that could represent its unit.²²

As SNCC’s political tactics and ideologies evolved, members’ attire evolved, too, creating a mode of dress that redefined the political significance and the look of the black activist body. Once they began organizing in the rural South and had more direct contact with black sharecroppers, SNCC women embraced for both practical and political reasons the clothing of the people they helped organize. SNCC men wore white or light-blue collared work shirts, and women wore shirts of the same color, with petite collars. Both genders wore denim pants or overalls (some women wore denim skirts). Their “uniform of choice” was not without historical, political, and cultural significance.²³ In the early nineteenth century, slave owners bought raw denim and other cheap fabrics such as osnaburg in bulk to clothe their bondmen and bondwomen. Often referring to these fabrics as “Negro clothes,” white Americans ensured that clothing created cultural and social difference between themselves and their enslaved workers. In 1873 clothing manufacturer Levi Strauss and Company began mass-producing denim trousers, which were purchased by miners in California and by sharecroppers in the South. By World War II, denim was a standard uniform for male and female factory workers.²⁴ In adopting the clothing of African American wage laborers instead of the attire worn by the black middle class, SNCC was consciously reevaluating the politics of respectability. Sociologist Joanne Entwistle argues that all dress is a “second skin” that takes on various meanings in different social settings.²⁵ Her theory provides a language to describe the ways the organization crafted a “SNCC skin,” its denim uniform, that came to symbolize

²² *Ibid.*, 51; Bell interview (quotation).

²³ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 113–14; Jean Wiley, “Letter to My Adolescent Son,” in Faith S. Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, 2010), 514–24 (quotation on 515).

²⁴ James Sullivan, *Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York, 2006), 41, 112, 5, 68–72; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (8th ed.; New York, 2000), 148 (quotation).

²⁵ Joanne Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” in Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun, eds., *The Fashion Reader* (New York, 2007), 93–104 (quotation on 93).

SNCC's revolutionary army. For women, this look also included abandoning processed hairstyles and opting to wear their natural hair. SNCC members believed adopting the same "skin" would help them build a democratic community that united the activists across race, gender, and class lines.²⁶

SNCC women's new denim uniform was more practical to wear than the Sunday-best clothing from the early sit-in movement. Though many black women in the rural South dressed in a manner that would be considered respectable, SNCC women chose instead to draw inspiration from black farmers. Overalls were the clothing of choice for sharecroppers because they had multiple pockets, good for storing farming tools. The denim was durable and could sustain the wear and tear of work in the fields. It was a cheap fabric that was easy to clean and did not have to be pressed. Moreover, denim pants and overalls were roomy and baggy and offered free range of movement that aided farmers as they got on and off tractors, horses, and so forth. SNCC women likely found the overalls sensible for many of the same reasons that farmers did. SNCC member Judy Richardson remembers, "You could put on jeans, and they got dirty, but they didn't look dirty. So given that we weren't washing at the frequency we should have and doing the wash [regularly], it became very efficient to wear what we wore." The various pockets served as storage spaces for flyers, pens, and leaflets that could be carried inconspicuously. Like sharecroppers, SNCC activists labored long hours in their "field," canvassing rural communities for African Americans who were bold enough to attempt to register to vote.²⁷

²⁶ Francis Shor, "Utopian Aspirations in the Black Freedom Movement: SNCC and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1960–1965," *Utopian Studies*, 15 (Winter 2004), 173–89. Shor argues that SNCC espoused a "grounded utopianism" that was both "concrete" and "critical." An example of SNCC people's grounded utopianism was their concept of the beloved community, or a community that had been redeemed from racist, sexist, and classist beliefs. According to Shor, SNCC's direct-action nonviolent tactics, sit-ins, voter registration drives, freedom rides, and so forth were designed to recreate the beloved community in American society. I argue that the SNCC skin was also a symbol of such beliefs, indicative of the role of culture in SNCC's political and social platform. *Ibid.*, esp. 173 (quotations).

²⁷ Author's interview with Judy Richardson, July 13, 2011, tape recording in author's possession; Diana de Marly, *Working Dress: A History of Occupational Clothing* (New York, 1986), 141. There is a body of literature that addresses the multiple meanings denim holds in the American imaginary. See Dirk Scheuring, "Heavy Duty Denim: 'Quality Never Dates,'" in Angela McRobbie, ed., *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music* (Boston, 1988), 225–36, esp. 227; and Kennedy Fraser, *The Fashionable Mind: Reflections on Fashion, 1970–1981* (New York, 1981), 91–95. Fraser analyzes how and why denim became hip and chic in the 1970s, arguing that the style gained popularity among the New Left and soon after became a mainstay in haute couture fashion houses.

Though denim was practical, SNCC activists also used it to represent their political alliance with sharecroppers and to critique the body politics of the black middle class. Debbie Amis Bell recalls, "We used [denim] to identify with the sharecroppers which we were helping to organize." In doing so, SNCC workers created a political network with the people in rural communities, some of whom had been involved in grassroots political organizing for decades.²⁸ The longer SNCC women worked among southern farm families, the more articulate and fervent the women's questioning of "respectability" became. And as this dialogue evolved, sharecropper attire emerged as the perfect style to make bold assertions about class. Thrift-store shirts and denims were the clothing of field laborers and the antithesis of the respectable ways that the black middle class was acculturated to dress. In the early 1960s the black popular press was particularly invested in promoting and reproducing an image of black middle-class leisure and indulgence. Articles in *Ebony* with titles such as "The Negro Status Seeker" studied black Americans' attempts to ascend the American social ladder. Advertisements showed black women playing tennis, attending elegant balls, and relaxing poolside.²⁹ Though many African Americans in rural areas of the South had never read *Ebony* magazine, most black middle-class southerners, and those with middle-class aspirations, were modeling behaviors and attitudes similar to those *Ebony* endorsed.³⁰

SNCC women worked closely with members of the rural farming community, developing both a respect for them and a romantic idea about their goodness and purity, which also framed the activists' ideological perspectives and desires to adopt sharecroppers' attire. For many SNCC members who came from privileged backgrounds, their political work was the first time they encountered poverty and realized some of the fallacies in how they had been trained to think

²⁸ Bell interview. For more on sharecroppers and grassroots organizing, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); and Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995).

²⁹ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920–1975* (Lexington, Ky., 2007), 102–5; "The Negro Status Seeker," *Ebony*, 15 (January 1960), 96–97; "Prevue of 1960 Swim Suits," *Ebony*, 15 (January 1960), 99–100, 102; Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, "'Dress Modestly, Neatly . . . As If You Were Going to Church,'" 90–91. For the history of *Ebony* magazine, see Ben Burns, *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism* (Jackson, Miss., 1996).

³⁰ Herbert Randall and Bobs M. Tusa, *Faces of Freedom Summer* (Tuscaloosa, 2001), 69. A photograph shows SNCC activist Arthur Reese with young black boys in Mississippi reading *Ebony* magazine, which, the caption notes, "many of them had never seen before."

about their class status.³¹ Even those who had not grown up with much, but whose college experiences had created a disconnect with their working-class roots, had to readjust to life among the poor and laboring classes. Gloria Wade-Gayles, who was born in the South but educated in predominantly white institutions in the North, considered her activist peers' fascination with black southerners a fetishism of sorts, or what black feminist theorist bell hooks terms "eating the Other." Wade-Gayles recalls that black and white activists viewed their rural counterparts as "a fascinating primitive people, racial and cultural artifacts" that "we activists . . . could talk about in the life of comfort to which most of us returned." But Wade-Gayles believes that their romanticism was more than a mere quest for what hooks calls the ethnic "spice" that those outside the culture desire.³² It was rooted in something cultural and political, for working in the South, as Wade-Gayles writes, "connected us to a humanity," that of the community she termed "black people of the soil." Defining black southerners as people of the soil further linked the black body to field labor. By adopting black farmworkers' bodies or "skin" through the wearing of denim, SNCC believed it was reestablishing a soul tie to the rural black community. The idea helped mobilize SNCC women who sought to return to their (real and imagined) ethnic roots in order to redeem America from itself.³³

By consciously adopting the SNCC skin as a political strategy, SNCC women placed themselves at the center of intraracial class

³¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 142–44.

³² bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, 1992), 21–39 (first quotation on 36; fourth quotation on 21); Gloria Wade-Gayles, *Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Woman's Journey Home* (Boston, 1992), 1, 121–25, 178 (second and third quotations). The embrace of ethnic cultures by the youth of the 1960s had a different tone, and thus different implications, than did the primitivism of the 1920s, which had also rendered African-influenced styles popular among chic white women. While the ethnic fashions of the early twentieth century were designed to create difference—"primitive," ethnic clothing on "modern," white bodies—young women and men of the 1960s were using clothing to deconstruct difference, though their attempts were also reflective of complicated race, class, and gender politics of the day. See Susan L. Hannel, "The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion," in Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, eds., *Twentieth-Century American Fashion* (New York, 2005), 57–77.

³³ Wade-Gayles, *Pushed Back to Strength*, 178; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 107. Hogan argues against a later reading of the organization's interest in rural southern culture as a "romanticization of the poor." She notes how significant the experience in the Deep South among poor and working-class African Americans was for black students who had grown up in middle-class families and had lived in middle-class culture their entire lives. I do not disagree with her point, though it is important to illustrate that romanticization does not render an experience meaningless or mean that one cannot engage in genuine political activity. Though some SNCC members did have a romantic view of life in the rural South, their work nevertheless translated into their aesthetic in ways that had deep political meaning for the organization and for them as individuals.

tensions among movement organizations. As SNCC distanced itself from the respectable body and the class politics it represented, some members of the organization became increasingly aware of such conflicts. By wearing denim, SNCC women chose to align themselves with the working classes, both in the rural areas of the South and in the cities. Judy Richardson, who was a leader of the Greenwood, Mississippi, campaign, remembers that SNCC workers earned the respect of members of the local NAACP because they did not come into the community dressing flamboyantly:

We were not organizing the southern black middle class, for whatever that was. We were organizing sharecroppers. So you didn't want to come in looking like you were coming in from the NAACP national office. Now there were those who did, but the thing is, the people [the local community] most respected were those from the local NAACP, people who did not dress like the national [NAACP]. One of the main reasons that the local NAACP people really worked with us and sheltered us and helped us to understand what it was that they needed help organizing was because we assumed that they were intelligent in a way that the national [NAACP] did not . . . Local people saw that we were of them, and I think they accepted us in a way because we were not standing around in suits and ties.³⁴

Richardson's observations about dress expose a long history of class tension within the black community. Many middle-class African Americans, both in the South and in the North, associated the rural laboring body with laziness, ignorance, and a backward way of life. For example, before Martin Luther King Jr. became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the seat was occupied by Vernon Johns, a minister and civil rights activist who supplemented his income by farming. Unlike King—who was college-educated, wore fine suits, spoke with an air of erudition, and had a “respectable,” fair-complexioned wife—Johns, who was also well educated, at Oberlin College and the University of Chicago, wore overalls while selling his produce in the city. His comfort with wearing a farmer's clothes in public spoke to a close tie with the soil, which, to the church's urbane congregants, symbolized poverty and a lack of refinement, and resulted in many clashes over issues of class and respectability.³⁵ Therefore, the SNCC women, many of whom were college-educated, who consciously chose to wear denim were exposing the problematics of such class stereotypes related to dress

³⁴ Richardson interview.

³⁵ For the class politics of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988), chap. 1; and Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, “Dress Modestly, Neatly . . . As If You Were Going to Church,” 90–91.

and the body. As the activists worked to mobilize black southerners against often staunchly held class lines, SNCC women had to navigate this terrain, learning southern social cues and mores about dress politics. While there were some sartorial miscommunications between SNCC and various subgroups within the broader community, it is clear that SNCC activists rejected elements of the respectable activist body and invested their own militant political and cultural value in the rural laboring body.

Though Richardson and others felt as if denim-clad SNCC members were welcomed in rural communities, the reception of SNCC's sharecropper style was mixed. According to social historian Charles M. Payne, some local residents felt the same way about SNCC as the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church congregants had felt about Vernon Johns: "anybody wearing old work clothes all the time couldn't be about very much."³⁶ C. C. Bryant, head of the Pike County, Mississippi, NAACP chapter, "worried that some of the organization's workers looked sloppy and unkempt."³⁷ Many within the poorer constituencies of the African diaspora associated sharecropper clothing and other forms of working-class attire with a past of poverty and oppression that they wanted to forget. South African singer Miriam Makeba, who dated and eventually married SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael in the late 1960s, was critical of his and his SNCC comrades' adoption of the clothing of the impoverished. Makeba, who grew up poor in a rural town outside Johannesburg, felt that Carmichael, who had no personal experience with black poverty, viewed it through a romantic middle-class lens. Makeba believed that only a person of privilege would think it proper to wear the clothing of the working class as a form of social rebellion:

When I was growing up, we were poor. But we were clean, and we took great pride in the way we dressed and looked. Stokely and his American friends, who are not poor, dress like vagabonds. Stokely wears dirty jeans and torn jackets. He and his friends say that being dirty and wearing tattered clothes means that a person identifies with the masses. This makes me mad, because it is just wrong and it sounds patronizing. "Hey man, I grew up with the 'masses.' We were not proud of our poverty."³⁸

Makeba interpreted SNCC's denim uniform as a hipster approach to activism. By mocking how Carmichael said *the masses*, she implied

³⁶ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 241.

³⁷ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 113–14 (quotation on 114).

³⁸ Miriam Makeba, with James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New York, 1987), 154–56 (quotation on 155–56).

that Carmichael and his peers used the term pejoratively. Although Carmichael wore the denim uniform, in Makeba's view he had the privilege of putting it on and taking it off as he saw fit, while truly impoverished people did not have such luxury. Activist Charles Evers's memories of his childhood in Mississippi echo Makeba's sentiments. Evers described being so poor that the only nice clothes his family had were reserved for Sunday when they went to church. Once they returned home, their first act was to remove the fine Sunday clothes and put on their old denim jeans. From Evers's perspective, denim was synonymous with the poverty of his youth, and as an adult, he could not bear to put on the clothes associated with a background he had worked so hard to overcome.³⁹

Many SNCC members, particularly in the early years of the organization, were conscious of the class politics behind their clothing choices and often confronted the issue of romanticization of working-class culture. Debbie Amis Bell remembers that she and her father, who was a member of the Communist Party in Philadelphia, had conversations about the SNCC skin and why working-class people might have been skeptical of activists' choice to wear denim: "In the discussions I had with my dad, who was an activist, he said that workers always hated [their denim uniforms] when they're not on the job, so as soon as people got off of their shift, they would shower and change into their nice clothes. . . . I always wondered if people took offense to us usurping their work clothes, but I never heard anything of that sort."⁴⁰ Bell thus provides an example of the various, complex meanings that denim had for different segments of the black community. For many, denim represented a skin they were eager to shed once they left the workplace. SNCC women, however, used denim to draw on a history of oppression of black women's laboring bodies to make a political claim. Historian Tera W. Hunter argues that for laundresses, domestics, and other female wage laborers in the South, the laboring body was only one part of their identity. White employers required laboring women to wear uniforms as a way to restrict the roles the black female body could play. Putting on the maid's uniform relegated the black woman to domestic service. Exercising the freedom to take off the uniform after a long day's work, putting on swanky dress clothes, and going dancing in local dance halls and juke joints in their own communities allowed black

³⁹ White and White, *Stylin'*, 173; Sullivan, *Jeans*, 112.

⁴⁰ Bell interview.

domestic workers to reclaim agency over their bodies.⁴¹ Like these domestic workers in the early-twentieth-century South, SNCC women, too, were reclaiming the agency of their bodies. In exercising their freedom to remove their “respectable” clothing, they challenged notions of feminine propriety related to dress. Moreover, by reappropriating the workers’ uniform, SNCC women were reclaiming the pride and dignity of laboring women and transgressing the politics of respectability in order to mobilize everyday people. Judy Richardson concludes, “I do not think we could have organized as effectively if we had not been in the everyday dress during the everyday times that the people that we organized dressed in.”⁴² Though wearing denim had its limitations, SNCC women’s decision to wear denim was politically effective because it demonstrated the need to break down class barriers within the black community to gain greater freedoms for African Americans and for women.

After SNCC members began wearing their denims in the rural South, they also decided to wear jeans and overalls in urban centers such as Atlanta, where SNCC’s national headquarters was located. Ella Baker, who had become a mother figure for the young women and men of SNCC, tried to school them on how to use the denim uniform most effectively. The SNCC skin helped create a public identity for the group, particularly among Atlanta college students. “You were identified almost immediately when you were walking down the street that you were a worker in the civil rights movement by what you were wearing,” Debbie Amis Bell recalls.⁴³ The denim uniform became a symbol of one’s commitment to the movement, and SNCC members wore denim on campus to recruit students to join the demonstrations. Yet Baker encouraged them to be strategic about when, why, and for what end they wore their denim attire. During a SNCC meeting around 1963, Baker had a discussion with the young women and men—present were Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Judy Richardson, Roberta “Bobbi” Yancy, James Forman, Julian Bond, and several others—about their use of denim. Though SNCC members

⁴¹ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 26, 168–69, 179–83. Field work—and the denim uniform associated with such labor—has been gendered as men’s labor (although enslaved women worked in the fields, and there were also female sharecroppers and factory workers), while domestic work has been gendered as women’s work. In wearing denim, many SNCC women believed they were representing the various forms of labor that black women had endured from slavery through the 1960s. In doing so, they challenged the gendering of labor.

⁴² Richardson interview.

⁴³ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 258–59; Bell interview (quotation).

had begun to understand and question the class politics of the black community, Baker noted that they would have to “break through the pseudo-sophistication of college students and you can’t do it in overalls.”⁴⁴ By telling SNCC leaders that in denim they could not effectively mobilize college students, she was not suggesting that they abandon the strategy altogether, because the look was successful in recruiting some women (like Spelman College student Gwendolyn Robinson). Instead, Baker wanted SNCC activists to understand that it was politically savvy to know when to put on and take off the uniform. Baker, who herself was a southern daughter, aimed to teach SNCC women and men how to be fluent in the cultural politics and linguistics of multiple communities in order to perform behaviors that gave them cultural capital in each environment. **SNCC members continued to use denim as the official SNCC uniform**; however, field secretaries had the autonomy to determine a loose dress code for the SNCC soldiers under their command. For example, Gwen Robinson, who headed up the Laurel, Mississippi, project in 1964, instructed her staff to adhere to a dress code: “no shorts in the streets and generally modest dress.” Such policies gave SNCC members the freedom to choose when to wear the denim.⁴⁵

When Baker advised the students how to make the SNCC skin a more effective tool for recruitment, she had a good point. **But the use of denim had transcended simply being a practical tool to become a powerful sign of the ways that the zeitgeist of youthful rebellion could be channeled into fruitful political energy.** By adopting the “skin” of working-class people, SNCC harnessed the progressive potential of the early student sit-in movement, with its bold attempts to integrate lunch counters and bus stations, and made it even more radical. **By wearing their uniform, not only were SNCC activists learning to form cross-class alliances that otherwise they might not have been able to forge, but also they were consciously and subconsciously creating a new political and aesthetic value for black activists and for the black body in general. This aesthetic was particularly important for SNCC women, who used the uniform to advance the cause not only of their race but also of their gender. By drawing on the history of the oppression of black women laborers’ bodies, SNCC women**

⁴⁴ Richardson interview; Judy Richardson, “SNCC: My Enduring ‘Circle of Trust,’” in Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 348–65 (quotation on 355).

⁴⁵ Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons (Gwendolyn Robinson), “From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon,” in Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 9–32, esp. 15–17, 27–32 (quotation on 29).

redefined what a black, female body could look like and how it could perform in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Therefore, SNCC women's adoption of denim overalls, pants, and skirts was an important, yet vexed, intervention that reflected a budding form of second-wave feminism.

For southern black women in the twentieth century, as Shane White and Graham White write, "[n]ew ways of displaying their bodies hinted, above all, at the possibility of personal liberation" from their assigned place in American society.⁴⁶ Within other political and bohemian enclaves in the United States, such as the artistic spaces of Greenwich Village, women were attempting to change the nature of the male gaze, making themselves subjects instead of objects. SNCC women's embrace of denim was part of a larger trend, where women appropriated men's clothing to blur gender lines and to transgress gender-based power hierarchies. Folksingers such as African American Odetta and Mexican-Scottish Joan Baez were also wearing jeans and other garments that flouted normative notions of how women should dress. SNCC women, including Dorie Ladner, Joyce Ladner, and others, came into contact with such women as they traveled the well-worn route from Mississippi to New York City in 1963. The Ladner sisters stayed with self-proclaimed "bohemian nut case" activist Rachelle Horowitz and her friend, Yale University law student and activist Eleanor Holmes (who later served in the U.S. Congress as the delegate from the District of Columbia) when they worked from SNCC's New York City office as the group prepared for the March on Washington. Such experiences allowed SNCC women to craft their own women-centered stance on the power and political and cultural efficacy of the SNCC skin.⁴⁷

Wearing denim and natural hairstyles stemmed from the freedom of SNCC women to decide how to adorn their bodies and how to define their own standards of respectability. SNCC workers Norma June Davis and Lana Taylor Sims recall that at Spelman College it was mandatory for women to wear stockings (not socks) because they were not permitted to go barelegged or barefooted.⁴⁸ When SNCC activist and educator Howard Zinn arrived to teach at Spelman in 1956, the students largely adhered to the code of ethics the college imposed, and

⁴⁶ White and White, *Stylin'*, 190.

⁴⁷ Joan Steinau Lester, *Eleanor Holmes Norton: Fire in My Soul* (New York, 2003), 116; John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 2003), 278 (quotation).

⁴⁸ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 47.

there was no sign that a movement could spark there. Zinn notes, “The campus was quiet. The city looked quiet. My students were quiet.” Yet while things appeared calm on the surface in the mid-1950s, a spirit of social and cultural activism was brewing underneath, and it came to a boil in the early 1960s. “And then in a few years,” Zinn continues, “this quiet campus exploded and the adjacent campuses exploded.” Spelman students “were out in the city, they were demonstrating, they were sitting in, they were marching, they were going to jail, they were sacrificing.”⁴⁹ With such strict college rules about proper dress and adornment, any infraction against these mandates constituted an act of resistance. Debbie Amis Bell and the Spelman students who were active in the movement, including her sister Cynthia Amis, made their own denim skirts, which also enabled them to refuse to shop at stores that systematically upheld Jim Crow. Bell recalls, “Most of the women wore jean material. . . . I had made myself a couple of denim skirts and jeans we would wear.” With their defiance of a dress code that sought to contain the black female body and with their labor to create an alternative uniform, Bell and other SNCC women embraced a non-mainstream culture.⁵⁰

As SNCC women carved out this social and cultural space for themselves within the segregated southern communities they were helping mobilize, they developed a sisterhood circle in which they could craft their own women-centered dress and beauty aesthetic for the new activist female body. These women espoused an ideology and political aesthetic that countered normative notions of female beauty. White SNCC member Mary E. King remembers that most women in SNCC, regardless of race, dressed “plain, we wore little or no makeup, cut one another’s hair, and had no possessions or clothing worth mentioning.”⁵¹ This unadorned style was a distinct contrast with the respectable body of the early sit-in years, when, as Debbie Amis Bell has noted, women were reluctant to wear natural styles, which were perceived to mar the respectable body and thus damage racial self-esteem. By 1961 those women who headed off to places such as

⁴⁹ “The Beloved Community: Origins of SNCC,” in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998), 18–38, esp. 27–29 (first quotation on 27; remaining quotations on 28). This chapter is an interview with Howard Zinn and other SNCC members Diane Nash, Mary King, Julian Bond, Joanne Grant, Paul Lauter, Tom Hayden, Charles McDew, James Forman, and Danny Lyon. See also Harry G. Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957–1967* (Macon, Ga., 2005).

⁵⁰ Bell interview. See also Simmons, “From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon,” 15.

⁵¹ Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1987), 464.

McComb, Mississippi, were moving toward a new political and aesthetic value system based on natural hair and denim. Gradually, SNCC women in different areas of the South began to forgo the trip to the salon, opting instead to cut their hair short and wear it unprocessed. Women like Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Gracie Hawthorne, Bernice Johnson, Jennifer Lawson, Gwen Robinson, Freddie Greene Biddle, Ethel Minor, Jean Wheeler Smith, Muriel Tillinghast, and E. Jeanne Breaker—most of whom were from elite institutions such as Tougaloo College, Spelman College, and Howard University—thwarted their institutions' and their families' definitions of respectability.⁵² Spelman student Gwen Robinson, who took Zinn's black history class early in her coursework, began wearing "a natural" around 1962 as a freshman. "After I appeared on campus with my new Afro," Robinson recalls, "I was called into the dean of students' office. She informed me that I was an embarrassment to the school, as all Spelman women were expected to be well-groomed." Natural hair, the dean said, was "a disgrace."⁵³ Like Robinson, who defied Spelman's standards of beauty and adornment, Debbie Amis Bell and her peers, over time, became less concerned with maintaining neatly coiffed hairstyles and wearing stylish clothing. She states, "I don't ever remember any discussions of frivolous things like [fashion] Even in housing, I don't remember us discussing anything about clothing or cosmetics."⁵⁴ Many SNCC women, therefore, rejected a broader beauty culture in which hair-care products and makeup were essential.

Though the choice to wear natural hairstyles and denim may seem to have emerged with ease, SNCC women struggled with abandoning

⁵² Bell interview; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 113, 173–75; Randall and Tusa, *Faces of Freedom Summer*, 54; "Artist Spotlight: Bernice Johnson Reagon, Civil Rights Song Leader," *Smithsonian Folkways*, http://folkways.si.edu/explore_folkways/bernice_reagon; Muriel Tillinghast, "Depending on Ourselves," in Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 250–57, esp. 250; E. Jeanne Breaker Johnson, "It's Okay to Fight the Status Quo," in Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 344–48, esp. 346. According to Mary King, Jean Wheeler Smith was a student at Howard when the dean of women, Patricia Roberts Harris, asked Smith to straighten her hair, a request that Smith ardently refused. Later, Harris and Smith became close friends and enjoyed a mentor/mentee relationship built on mutual respect. See King, *Freedom Song*, 462–63. Conversely, Stokely Carmichael remembers the Howard dean of women coming to the defense of Carmichael's girlfriend when she was told to straighten her natural hair. See Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 119. While there was a general distaste for natural hair on the count that it was deemed not respectable, there was no uniform university policy regarding natural hair.

⁵³ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 174 (first and fourth quotations); Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," 15 (second and third quotations).

⁵⁴ Bell interview.

the respectable body that they had been trained to find value, dignity, and power in. Debbie Amis Bell, who began wearing her hair natural in the early 1960s, speaks to women's anxieties about the ragged state of their hair during the early movement years: "The natural hair was new [in the early 1960s]. But a lot of us had adopted the style, first of all because we could not have afforded to do anything else other than that." Like wearing denim, natural hair was partly a matter of practicality. SNCC women who had devoted themselves to the movement full-time often had very little money for food, much less to get their hair done. Trips to the salon became a luxury—and a task that many started to consider frivolous given their regular encounters with sexualized violence and even murder. "Some of us were very bedraggled," Bell notes; "[Natural hair] was not becoming to us, but we thought our message was the most important thing and not our looks."⁵⁵ In other words, instead of creating a form of sisterhood and community that revolved around the respectable body and its required upkeep, SNCC women had to create a new aesthetic and political approach. As Judy Richardson explains, "[Wearing our hair natural] was an outward manifestation that we had broken from the traditional norms [W]e don't abide by segregation and we're trying to get economic equity [T]he outward way we do that is the hair and the dress."⁵⁶ Rejecting processed hair and makeup altogether and linking their rejection to a political stance gradually became a way to accept that SNCC women could no longer regularly undergo the process of bourgeois beautification.

That SNCC women chose to wear natural hairstyles and to adopt overalls in place of dresses suggests that they were defying prescribed gender roles. Though in many ways SNCC was a progressive organization in its outlook on men's and women's roles within the group, it still experienced issues related to gender inequalities.⁵⁷ By opting to wear denim overalls and pants instead of skirts, women challenged both the notion that only men should wear pants and the idea that men were natural leaders. By choosing to wear overalls, some SNCC women asserted that women could literally and figuratively "wear the pants" in the public sphere. Casey Hayden stresses that the women of SNCC, both black and white, created a laboring identity for themselves as "organizers," which was a gender-neutral term. "To be an

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Richardson interview.

⁵⁷ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 151–57.

organizer was very asexual,” Hayden states.⁵⁸ In other words, SNCC women used the SNCC skin not only to align themselves with the sharecroppers they organized but also to position themselves as equals with their male comrades. There would be no separation in terms of who performed certain duties. **The denim attire was a physical marker of the ways women were recreating gender politics within the organization.** To be sure, this concept was not embraced by all SNCC women, and there were disputes among women about the degree to which they should promote a women-centered political agenda. For Judy Richardson, **wearing a denim skirt was a way for women to maintain a sense of femininity that was rooted in traditional constructions of respectability.** Richardson recalls, “I’ve never thought about [wearing denim] as being a way to be gender neutral. Although we had jeans on, a lot of folks had denim skirts [W]omen wore denim skirts.”⁵⁹

Other SNCC women, such as Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner, specifically used clothing to undermine normative notions of dress for women. As photographs taken by photojournalists Matt Herron and Ivan Massar indicate, the Ladner sisters even wore their overalls to the March on Washington, a venue where the old-guard civil rights organizations were attempting to project the respectable body to the American public (see Figures 2 and 3). However, images of the Ladner sisters did not appear in the major publications of the day. For example, Johnson Publishing Company, which produced *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, ran a special edition on the March on Washington titled *The Day They Marched*. The publication featured pictures of various black women—such as activists Daisy Bates and Rosa Parks, entertainers Diahann Carroll and Lena Horne, as well as everyday women—adorned in dresses, cardigans, pearls, pillbox hats, and gloves with their hair straightened and neatly styled. Joyce and Dorie Ladner, with their natural hairdos and denim overalls, stood in stark contrast to these women. Though *The Day They Marched* offers no commentary on the politics of dress, the absence of images of SNCC women in denim overalls speaks volumes on how the Ladner sisters used the SNCC skin to challenge the politics of respectability for black women. In doing so, they also publicly redefined what the

⁵⁸ Casey Hayden, “In the Attics of My Mind,” in Holsaert et al., eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 381–88 (quotations on 386).

⁵⁹ Richardson interview.



Figure 2. Warren K. Leffler, "Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C.," August 28, 1963. This image of women wearing skirts, dresses, and pearl earrings and men wearing dress shirts, ties, and trousers offers an example of the attire we imagine most civil rights activists wore in the early 1960s. Many considered wearing their "Sunday best" an important element of garnering full citizenship rights. *Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., LC-U9-10364-37.*

activist body should look like and how it should function.⁶⁰ Though many of the other SNCC women may have elected to wear denim skirts instead of overalls, even wearing denim skirts challenged the notion of the respectable dress. Anne Moody was awed by her peers' willingness to wear denim skirts and jeans at the March on Washington, a reaction that speaks to how radicalized some SNCC women had become and how deeply a new ideology had become entrenched in their identities in the few years since 1960.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Doris E. Saunders, ed., *The Day They Marched* (Chicago, 1963), 9, 39, 50–52, 60, 66–67. A photograph of the Ladner sisters at the March on Washington can be found with Joyce Ladner, "Why All African Americans Must Vote!" *The Ladner Report* (blog), September 30, 2008, http://www.theladnerreportblog.blogspot.com/2008_09_01_archive.html. See also figure 3.

⁶¹ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 275. Part of Moody's cluelessness on the emerging SNCC uniform could have been due to the fact that the various SNCC campaigns were run semiautonomously; project organizers had the authority to set their own dress codes according to the social mores and resources of the community where they were organizing. Moody's daily attire thus could have been vastly different from others' in SNCC's early years.



Figure 3. Joyce Ladner at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Photograph by Ivan Massar. Massar's contemporary, photojournalist Matt Herron, who also covered the southern black freedom movement for over a decade, does not believe that similar photos he took of Joyce Ladner at the March on Washington were ever published in newspapers in the 1960s. Thus, these images, like the photo of the Ladner sisters posted on Joyce Ladner's blog in September 2008 (see note 60), were nearly lost to history. The digital age has given these images new life, making them easier to circulate, which allows historians to uncover and examine new aspects of the civil rights movement. *Courtesy Ivan Massar/TakeStock.*

Although in SNCC's first three years, the denim and natural hair look emerged unevenly among SNCC's ranks, by 1963 the SNCC skin was so ubiquitous that it seemed to be the organization's official uniform. When Judy Richardson left Swarthmore College to

join the hundred other members of SNCC's paid staff in 1963, natural hair and denim were the standard. Before she joined, Richardson was schooled by the white veteran SNCC worker Penny Patch about the organization's aesthetic politics. Patch, who had just returned to Swarthmore after the freedom rides, told Richardson—who at the time religiously straightened her hair once a week at Miss Preleau's Salon in Tarrytown, New York—"you're going to have to stop frying your hair. Nobody has straight hair." Though most local organizers did still wear their hair straightened, Richardson found that Patch was correct: SNCC women did not. Patch's admonishment of Richardson's processed hair was telling of the degree to which among SNCC women the unadorned look had become a part of the SNCC skin.⁶² It was a defining attribute of who they were, how they believed the activist body should appear, and the political and aesthetic value they placed on their style. The same went with the denim uniform. Richardson states, "[Denim] was already a given; that was our dress." Joining SNCC, women like Richardson were baptized into the SNCC way of being. "I don't think I ever thought about it," she recalls; "It was assumed that that's what you'd be wearing, both in the national office and in the field."⁶³ The women came in as individuals, carrying the markers of their class backgrounds, and emerged as SNCC people, who wore their hair natural and made themselves denim skirts and jeans. For SNCC women, this practice of adornment replaced the ritual of going to the beauty salon. The women now associated natural hairstyles and denim not only with radical politics but also with a new sense of race and gender pride.

Though SNCC women were wearing denims as a radical cultural and political statement, by and large the media continued to present their activism through the lens of respectability, obscuring the women's involvement in the radical youth cultures of the early 1960s. Articles with titles like "Women Around Nation Are Joining the Battle to Get Freedom for All" featured SNCC women like

⁶² Richardson interview. Though Richardson did not express that she was bothered by Patch, a white woman, telling her how she could and could not wear her hair, many African American women and men within SNCC were growing weary with the increasing number of white volunteers (most of whom were new to the movement) who felt they had a major say in the direction the organization was moving in, both politically and aesthetically. Thus, conversations about dress and adornment helped foreshadow SNCC's eventual expulsion of its white members and its shift to Black Power ideologies.

⁶³ Richardson interview.

Prathia Hall, daughter of a Baptist minister. Hall was described as a “tall, stately,” churchgoing woman who left theology school to work for the movement, earning a meager ten dollars a week. And while the article noted her numerous arrests in her quest for black freedom, it highlighted Hall’s femininity and her markers of respectability, which defined her activism as a worthy pursuit. This depiction would have been considered a triumph by many African Americans who longed to see black women presented favorably. Yet, for many young SNCC activists who were breaking from the image of black womanhood associated with the black middle class, the media’s characterization of SNCC women discounted their radical political and cultural views.⁶⁴

In the media’s construction of the respectable, church-based civil rights movement, SNCC men were the true revolutionaries, supported by women who performed respectability in order to lay claim to class status. This dominant construction has created a historical blind spot that has erased radical jeans-wearing SNCC women from the public memory of the early movement. Images of women wearing their Sunday best remain staunchly grounded in the public imagination. This emphasis helps perpetuate the judgment that the early movement was more legitimate and successful than Black Power. In contrast, pictures of SNCC men such as James Forman, Stokely Carmichael, and Bob Moses have helped place them within the lineage of radical activism, which informed the uniform and political strategies of Black Power organizations, including the Black Panther Party. However, the reality is that women like the Ladner sisters, Debbie Amis Bell, Judy Richardson, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Gwen Robinson, and a host of others were central to the creation of a black aesthetic of dress, hair, and beauty that became fashionable for black women of the 1970s, as “the natural” worn by SNCC women morphed into the “Afro” and as black Americans began adopting other forms of working-class African American and African modes of dress. Yet, because there is not much of a public record of SNCC women wearing jeans and denim, they, and their radical reimagining of their black, female identities, are left out of this trajectory.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Sue Cronk, “Women Around Nation Are Joining the Battle to Get Freedom for All: Clubwomen, Coeds Seek Racial Justice,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, March 22, 1964, pp. F1, F3 (quotation).

⁶⁵ On Black Power and the 1970s aesthetic, see Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, N.C., 2010); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago, 1992);

The media's fascination with northern white student volunteers and its construction of radical white teens as the faces of the New Left have also led to SNCC women's erasure from the iconography of 1960s youth culture. According to SNCC volunteer Geoffrey Cowan, publications such as *Look* magazine came to SNCC training sessions in Oxford, Ohio, specifically aiming to write stories on "naive" white women volunteers from northern institutions. Cowan believed, as Bob Moses told the students, that it was the white volunteers and their conspicuous presence that the press was most interested in, rather than SNCC staff members or blacks in Mississippi.⁶⁶ This media focus led SNCC and other organizations to rethink what role they wanted and needed white volunteers to play in the movement. Elder activist Bayard Rustin spoke before a crowd of SNCC members at Howard University in 1963, arguing "that white students should 'stop putting on blue jeans and packing off to Mississippi.'"⁶⁷ But the white volunteers kept coming. As historian Wesley C. Hogan writes, "The SNCC staff had soared from 20 members before 1963, to about 100 at the end of 1963, to over 170 by the fall of 1964," with perhaps a thousand volunteers, most of whom were white members who stayed on after Freedom Summer.⁶⁸ In this transition, the political meaning of the denim was largely lost. Even members of SNCC became critical of the group's style, believing that the unadorned look was becoming political pastiche, a cool, hip look—perhaps even "a status symbol," as John Lewis questioned—for socially conscious youth. Judy Richardson notes that once these white students returned to their college campuses, now as veterans of the civil rights movement, many still wore the SNCC blue jeans.⁶⁹ However, within the context of the college campus, the original political meaning and the history behind SNCC women's and men's decisions to wear denim overalls and jeans were forgotten, and the style became even more identified

Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, N.C., 2006); Linda Welters, "The Natural Look: American Style in the 1970s," *Fashion Theory*, 12 (December 2008), 489–510; Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," in Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green, eds., *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York, 1998), 23–31; Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*; and Susannah Walker, "Black Is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960–1975," in Scranton, ed., *Beauty and Business*, 254–77.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi* (New York, 1965), 18.

⁶⁷ William J. Raspberry, "Whites Urged to Stay North," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, December 2, 1963, p. A12.

⁶⁸ Carson, *In Struggle*, 110; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 202.

⁶⁹ Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 113 (quotation); Richardson interview.

with white bohemians in particular, erasing the history of radical black youth wearing denim overalls. Because of these intraracial politics and the influence of both the black and the mainstream media, the radical race and gender activism that SNCC women's denim symbolized was attributed to a masculine and a white liberal pursuit of freedom, while black women remained shrouded in a highly constructed veil of genteel womanhood.⁷⁰

This story of a conversion from dresses to denim situates SNCC women within a history of radical youth activism wherein dress and fashion became symbols of their vision for a new America. Clothing had the power to convey meaning about their personal and political beliefs as well as to establish a community with a collective ethos. Therefore, this article relates more than a story about fashion or beauty. SNCC women's decisions about their hair and their clothing were not simply the choices of image-consumed college students but of women whose exposure to new situations forced them to rethink their upbringing and how they defined themselves and the world around them. They used their agency to construct their own identities in ways that both shielded them from the emotional and sexualized violence of white mobs and promoted a sense of racial and gendered pride.

By revising the history of SNCC women to examine the political potential of fashion and beauty, we uncover more connections between the denim-clad women of SNCC in the early 1960s and the Afro- and dashiki-wearing sisters of the Black Power movement era. These SNCC women served as early models of radical black womanhood, an image that women like Angela Y. Davis, Kathleen N. Cleaver, and Assata Shakur projected in the early 1970s. Thus, the cultural and political body politics of Black Power—not only the political ideologies—can be traced to this earlier period.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Cronk, "Women Around Nation Are Joining the Battle to Get Freedom for All," pp. F1, F3. I am not suggesting that the women of SNCC were the only ones wearing radical clothing or breaking from respectable forms of dress, because there were other black women—both high-profile women such as singers Odetta, Nina Simone, and Miriam Makeba and non-famous women—who were wearing natural hairstyles and African-inspired garments and accessories. However, because the civil rights movement garnered national and international attention, the performance of respectability was deemed crucial to the legislative success of the movement. Black women working within the movement and choosing to depart from this image would have been seen as subversive by many outside African Americans.

⁷¹ An established body of work situates the roots of Black Power ideologies and activist strategies in the period preceding 1965. See Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999); and Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York, 2006).

Though SNCC women were not the sole influence on black women's changing aesthetic tastes, their voices in this cultural-political discourse helped shape the Soul Power image that black youth embraced and advanced in the late 1960s and early 1970s.