E. FAYE BUTLER IS
FANNIE LOU HAMER,
SPEAK
ON IT!

Adapted by Cheryl L. West
from her play Fannie

Directed by Henry Godinez
Music Direction and Arrangements by Felton Offard

PHOTO OF FANNIE LOU HAMER BY KEN THOMPSON. ©THE GENERAL BOARD OF GLOBAL MINISTRIES OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, INC. USED WITH PERMISSION OF GLOBAL MINISTRIES.
Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!
by CHERYL L. WEST
Directed by HENRY GODINEZ

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Fannie Was Not Alone: Two Other Women You Should Know - An Introduction to the Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak on It! Study Guide
By WILLA J. TAYLOR

A question: how many of you had heard of Fannie Lou Hamer before picking up this study guide?

You are certainly excused if you hadn’t. Time has not served her well. Even though she was a powerful force in the movement for civil rights and the fight to win voting rights for Blacks, she does not figure prominently in most textbooks. The reductivist nature of media, and the woefully incomplete canon of American history, reduces the accomplishments of many to the names of a famous few. But ordinary, everyday people, yesterday as well as today, are the force that drives change.

Women – and especially women of color – have often been left out of the larger narratives of the fights for justice, and that makes it easy to assume that historic events are shaped solely by the people we know of and learn about. With the exception of a few – Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King – their contributions have been relegated to the footnotes and the margins.

As we celebrate and uplift the story of Fannie Lou Hamer with Cheryl L. West’s beautifully rendered Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!, it seems appropriate that we also center the contributions...
of other women whose fierce activism and organizing helped shape the struggle for justice and equality. The women of the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s and 60s – like those in the fight for equity and justice today – understood the intersectional nature of the struggle for liberation and worked tirelessly within, and against, the patriarchal constraints of their time to build a blueprint for movement building that stands today.

Of course there are women whose names were never recorded, the women who made the sandwiches and set up the chairs for meetings, who cleaned the churches before and after meetings, who opened their homes to activists during Jim Crow; women who walked the picket lines and sat at lunch counters and boycotted busses; who organized their friends and family, who took the notes and recorded the minutes; who made the flyers and created the phone trees to get the word out in a world before cell phones, social media, and 24-hour news cycles.

There are also the women whose contributions should be as famous as Malcolm’s and Martin’s and Rosa’s. As you explore the life and activism of Fannie Lou Hamer, here are two of her contemporaries that you should also know.

**Ella Baker** was Executive Secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when she brought together young Black college activists who had been spearheading sit-ins across the South. This convening at Shaw University, her alma mater, was the beginning of SNCC (pronounced “snick”), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Baker recognized that young people were (as they are now) the hope of any movement.

Baker believed that voting rights were one key tool in the fight for freedom. She helped organize the Freedom Summer of 1964, which focused national attention on the fight to register Black voters in Mississippi and Alabama; and the Freedom Rides of 1961, which challenged segregation in the South.

A granddaughter of slaves, Baker spent most of her life in

“**The reductivist nature of media, and the woefully incomplete canon of American history, reduces the accomplishments of many to the names of a famous few.**”
the struggle for Black liberation and played major roles in three of the most influential civil rights groups: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Even though those organizations were headed by men, it was Baker’s incredible tenacity and organizing prowess that recruited everyday citizens, many of whom had been brutalized and terrorized, to join the struggle and demand the basic human rights they deserved.

Viola Liuzzo was one of the many white allies who fought for civil rights in the South during the violent and turbulent 1960s. A member of the NAACP in Detroit, Liuzzo had been active organizing protests for civil rights in Michigan when the television coverage of the Bloody Sunday march in Alabama spurred her to travel south.

Horrified by those black-and-white images of peaceful protestors (including future Congressman John Lewis) being beaten and tear gassed by state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Liuzzo wanted to have a bigger impact on the larger movement. She left her husband and children to drive from her home in Michigan to join the protestors. After two aborted march attempts, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis were planning a third march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, to confront Governor George Wallace. Working with local organizers with the Southern Christian Leadership Committee, Liuzzo volunteered to support march organizers by recruiting volunteers, providing first aid, and transporting marchers in her car to and from bus terminals and train stations.

On March 25th, 1965, Liuzzo was ferrying marchers between Montgomery and Selma, after they had successfully reached the state capital, when a car of Klansmen (including an FBI informant) began following her, trying to run her off the road. When they caught up to her Oldsmobile at a stop sign and noticed she was riding in the car with a Black man, they shot directly at her, hitting her twice in the head. She died at the scene.

These women were at the forefront of the struggle for human rights and liberty for Black people. Like many of the women leading the fight for justice today, their names should be better known to all of us who seek a more equitable and just world. It is up to us all to speak their names, learn of their contributions, and remember that it is not just the famous who can make a difference. Each of us has the power to change the world.

“Like many of the women leading the fight for justice today, their names should be better known to all of us who seek a more equitable and just world. It is up to us all to speak their names...”
In the present day, local political organizers and community members are gathered at an outdoor rally, encouraging everyone to “Get Out the Vote”. Suddenly, a flatbed truck decorated with political signs arrives on the scene, horn honking and blasting the protest song “I’m On My Way to Freedom”. Legendary 1960s civil rights organizer Fannie Lou Hamer, a middle-aged Black woman, emerges from the truck. She climbs onto the back of the truck with a musician, who sets up his harmonicas and guitar. Fannie addresses the crowd directly, saying that she is sick and tired of corrupt and racist politicians. She urges everyone to vote in the upcoming election.

Fannie begins to sing “Oh Freedom”, encouraging the audience to sing along. She recalls attending meetings with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who organized Black people in Mississippi to fight against segregation and to exercise their voting rights. Fannie describes attempting to register to vote for the first time at the courthouse in 1962 with other Black Mississippians. At the courthouse they were given a literacy test which demanded they write down the name of their employer, and were instructed to write an interpretation of the state laws; both were discriminatory requirements created to keep Black Americans from registering. Unable to register successfully, the organizers got back on their bus, which police immediately surrounded. To rally her group, Fannie began singing “This Little Light of Mine”, lifting everyone’s spirit. The audience in the present day joins in.

Fannie informs the audience of the more dangerous consequences of her activism. When the owner of the plantation where she was a sharecropper found out that Fannie had attempted to register, he fired her and her daughters. Later, white Mississipians shot into the home where they thought Fannie had been sleeping. Fannie asserts that these attacks would not keep her from exercising her rights and empowering other Black Mississipians to do the same. She leads the crowd in “I Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round”.

E. Faye Butler in “Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!” by Cheryl L. West. Photo by Liz Lauren.
Fannie delivers an informal sermon, recounting both support she received and conflict she faced from the church in her quest to secure rights for Black Americans. Fannie tells the crowd not to be mad at her for telling uncomfortable truths. She preaches on violent policing of Black and brown people, racism perpetuated by white women, and sexual assault against Black women. She criticizes the United States’ refusal to acknowledge that the country was formed on indigenous people’s land.

Holding a sign reading “To Hope is to Vote!”, Fannie leads the crowd in “We Shall Not Be Moved”. She recounts her work getting Black Mississipians registered to vote, facing violent opposition, and finally registering to vote herself. Exuberant, she leads “Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Freedom”. She marvels at the tireless work of civil rights activists who came before her, and how it inspired her to keep going. Eventually, she attended a voter registration workshop with a group of organizers in South Carolina. On their bus ride home into Mississippi, Fannie and several others were violently arrested when two members of the group asked to be served at a rest stop restaurant. Fannie recounts the traumatic memory of being brutally beaten in her cell by police officers, as well as two Black men who had also been arrested and who had been coerced by police into beating her. As she fought for her life, Fannie recalled her mother’s fierce protection of her children. In the present, she sings a song her mother used to sing: “Oh Lord You Know Just How I Feel”.

Fannie informs the crowd that she was charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, and that the beating left her with permanent damage to her legs and kidneys. Nevertheless, she swore to continue in her fight. She leads the audience in “I’ve Been Changed”.

Fannie criticizes white resistance to the Civil Rights Movement and addresses the realities of racism in all regions of the country, not just the South. She expresses disbelief at people who are apathetic to voting, knowing how hard she and other activists fought to secure that right for Black Americans.

She leads the crowd in “Certainly Lord”, asserting that she wants all aspects of her freedom right now, not one bit at a time. She urges the crowd to unite across racial groups, reminding the white audience members that a house divided cannot stand. Fannie and the crowd sing a spirited rendition of “I’m On My Way to Freedom” as she triumphantly rides away in the truck.
Tips for Watching Theatre Online
by LIAM COLLIER

The performance that you are about to watch was not designed for the screen.

Unlike the writers behind your favorite TV show, Cheryl L. West, the playwright of Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!, did not imagine you watching her play from your home. On the contrary, the most recent iteration of West’s script is meant to be performed outdoors in public parks and parking lots across Chicago and the Midwest.

E. Faye Butler, who plays Fannie Lou Hamer, is an incredible, charismatic performer; however, just as the blurry videos of a concert posted to social media will never compare to the live event, a recording of a piece of theatre will never be quite the same as the real thing.

Which is all a roundabout way of saying: you are about to watch something imperfect.

With this in mind, here are some steps we recommend you take to give yourself a more fulfilling theatrical experience:

**Before you begin**

- **Imagine the space.** Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It! is meant to be performed outdoors. Think of a public space near you where fifty audience members could safely gather for an evening of socially distanced theatre: perhaps a nearby park, a football field, or a parking lot. Imagine the location on an autumn afternoon. If you can, sit outside or near an open window while you watch.

- **Set aside any distractions.** Theatre often expects its audience’s full attention. Unlike TV shows, which you can pause and return to, plays build tension by asking audiences to lean in and listen closely. If you’re able to, go to a

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, theatres around the world have had to adapt their art form for a new medium.
space where you can watch alone, use headphones if you have any, and silence your phone for a moment so you can focus on the performance.

As You Watch:

• **Consider what you’re missing.** As you watch the videos provided, think about what aspects of the performance you cannot access through the screen. What might lie just outside the camera frame that you cannot see? Are there sounds, smells, or sensations that you would experience at the outdoor location you have in mind?

• **Listen to the audience.** At times during the recording you’ll hear the audience react to what’s happening on stage. Rather than let that distract you, think of it as a part of the theatrical experience.

After You Watch:

• **Reflect on your experience.** Did you enjoy what you watched?

  If you did, amazing! What moments would you have enjoyed seeing live?

  If not, what moments or aspects of the performance did you find off-putting? Would seeing the performance live have impacted your experience?

Theatre, at least prior to March 2020, was always meant to be experienced in-person. Right now, the theatre community is figuring out what it means to exist in a virtual space. For many of us, this is a brand new experience. As we navigate this uncertainty, we look forward to the day when audiences will be able to join us in person again.

Until then, thank you for being a part of this journey with us.
The following ELA and Theatre questions were written to accompany a video excerpt from “Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!” provided to schools in the School Matinee Series.

1. This excerpt is from the very beginning of the one-woman play Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!. Based on this short clip, what do you predict might happen in the rest of the play?

2. An objective is what a character wants. What is Fannie’s objective? What does she want from her audience?

   A tactic is what a character does to achieve their objective. What tactics does Fannie use to try to achieve her objective? As an audience member, do you find her tactics effective?

3. Fannie frequently leads the audience to participate in singing songs and in call and response. Have you ever been to a play or another type of live performance where you were invited to participate? If so, how did participating change your experience of the performance?
4. Throughout this excerpt Fannie sings “Oh Freedom!”, a well-known protest song during the Civil Rights Movement. Take a look at the lyrics below. What is the song about? Do you know of any songs with similar themes or lyrics?

   OH-O FREEDOM
   OH-O FREEDOM
   OH FREEDOM OVER ME, (OVER ME)

   AND BEFORE I BE A SLAVE
   I’LL BE BURIED IN MY GRAVE.
   AND GO HOME TO MY LORD AND BE FREE. (AND BE FREE)

   NO MORE WEEPIN’
   NO MORE WEEPIN’
   NO MORE WEEPIN’ OVER ME, (OVER ME)

   AND BEFORE I’D BE A SLAVE
   I’D BE BURIED IN MY GRAVE
   AND GO HOME TO MY LORD AND BE FREE

5. About halfway through this excerpt, Fannie says:

   “I thought by now things would’ve done changed. But look like I done either come to the future or all ya’ll done come to the past. Whichever it is, I know the fight ain’t over and freedom ain’t been won…”

What similarities do you think Fannie sees between the present day and her time period in the 1950s and 60s?
Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 2: Then and Now
by SAM MAUCERI

The following History and Civics questions were written to accompany a video excerpt from “Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak on It!” provided to schools in the School Matinee Series.

1. Young People in Activism

“SNCC people said I did a lot for the movement, but I tell you, them young people did a lot for me, too. Gave me books to read, taught me history…”

Then: Fannie praises the role of young people as organizers of the Civil Rights Movement. Think back to your history classes, or take a moment to read “How Youth Activists Impacted the Civil Rights Movement” by Greg Timmons. When you’re done, select one example of youth activism from the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s-60s. What social and political issues did those young people rally around? What tactics did they use to protest injustice?

Now: What examples of young people participating in activism do you see today? What issues do you see young people fighting for today? What tactics are they using?

2. Feminism and the Vote

“And as long as we speakin’ on the truth, I’m gonna speak to you white women for a minute. Lotta ya’ll got the vote while working to make sure we didn’t. Ya’ll aligned yourselves with any swole-headed white man in power.”
Then: Suffragettes in the late 1800s and early 1900s fought for and won the right for white women to vote in the U.S. When was the right to vote secured for Black women? Take a look at “It’s a Struggle They Will Wage Alone: How Black Women Won the Right to Vote” from Time for more information.

Now: Feminism is defined by feminist author and activist bell hooks as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”, and by the Encyclopedia Britannica as “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes”.

What rights are feminists fighting for today? Are all feminists fighting for the same issues? Is the right to vote secured for all women in the U.S. today?

3. Race and Gender

“But looka here, every time you stay silent about the wrongs done to us and to all women, regardless of color, you just as guilty. [...] I don’t care how much money you got or how big your house is, or how many times I’ve had to clean yours so I could feed mine. [...] Still I believe we got more in common than not. I believe if all women hook on to each other, we would become one hell of a voting majority.”

Then: Consider what you have learned about the 1950s in your history classes, and what you’ve seen in TV, movies, and books that take place in that era. What do you notice about women’s roles in those stories? What was a woman’s expected role in the home or the workplace in the 50s? How did women’s expected role in society in the 1950s differ from the roles women fill today? How do you think these roles differed based on factors like race and class?

Now: Fannie addresses white women who are complicit in racism, meaning involved in or helping to cause harm. What present day examples can you name of white women who align themselves with racist or anti-democratic agendas?

4. Feminist Issues Today

Now: Read this interview with Mikki Kendall, author of Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot. What similarities do you notice between her perspective on race and gender and Fannie Lou Hamer’s? How might differences in identity and experience like race, class, and sexual orientation affect someone’s connection to feminism today? What counts as a feminist issue? Is voting a feminist issue?
Who Was Fannie Lou Hamer?
by SAM MAUCERI

Although she has largely been sidelined in our historical memory, Fannie Lou Hamer was a formidable force in the fight for Black voting rights in America. Learn more about her early life, her activism, and her enduring fight for freedom in this article from *American Experience* from PBS.

Click the image below to learn more.

*Fannie Lou Hamer speaks at the Democratic National Convention in 1964.*
October 6, 1917
Fannie Lou Townsend is born in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She is the 20th and youngest child of Ella and James Townsend, who eke out a living as sharecroppers.

1924
Fannie begins to attend a one-room schoolhouse, open only between cotton-picking seasons. She excels at spelling bees and reciting poetry. When not at school, she works in the fields.

1930
Fannie’s formal education ends at 12 years old, when she leaves school to work full time. She continues to develop her reading skills by reading the Bible.

1944
Fannie marries Perry Hamer, a fellow plantation worker.

1961
Fannie undergoes surgery to remove a uterine tumor. The white doctor removes her entire uterus without her consent. Fannie and Perry would later adopt two daughters.

Summer, 1962
Fannie attempts to register to vote, but fails the registration test, which was crafted to keep Black Americans from voting. Upon returning home, her boss fires her for attempting to vote.

Fall, 1962
White supremacists shoot at Fannie, having heard of her voter registration attempts, but they miss. Fearing further retaliation, Fannie and her family temporarily move to nearby Tallahatchie County.

1964
Fannie helps found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which served as a counterpoint to the all-white Democratic Party and aimed to empower Black voices. She represents Mississippi at the Democratic National Convention, giving a televised speech in which she questions why, in the “land of the free,” not everyone can register to vote. Additionally this year, Fannie runs for a seat in the Senate, but does not win the election.

Fall 1963
Fannie attempts to vote, but is told she needs two poll tax receipts. She obtains them, but is dismayed by the continuous obstacles.

Spring, 1963
While traveling by bus, Fannie and other activists stop at a café. They are refused service, and a patrol officer asks them to leave. Fannie and others are arrested and taken to a jail in Winona, Mississippi. Fannie is confined to a cell and beaten with a blackjack. She never fully recovers from her injuries.

Winter, 1963
Taking the voter registration test for the third time, Fannie passes. Around this time she becomes involved with activism, becoming a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).
1966
Fannie marches with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She continues her work with grassroots campaigns and works on an autobiography entitled *To Praise Our Bridges*.

1969
Fannie founds the Freedom Farm Cooperative, which aims to redistribute economic power in agriculture. She also works with the National Council of Negro Women to create a “pig bank,” giving pigs to Black farmers, both for food and to help create financial opportunity. The FFC runs through the mid-1970s.

1971
Fannie co-founds the National Women’s Political Caucus, which aims to increase women’s roles in all aspects of political life and support women running for office. Fannie runs unsuccessfully for the Mississippi State Senate.

1972
Fannie’s health begins to deteriorate and she is hospitalized for nervous exhaustion.

March 14, 1977
Fannie dies from complications of hypertension and breast cancer. She is just 59 years old.
It may seem clear to most 21st century Americans that all adult citizens should have the right to vote, but 19th and even 20th century activists often advocated for their own group while ignoring the rights of people who were unlike them. While meeting with Frederick Douglass in 1866, women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton remarked that she would “cut off this right arm of mine” before she ever fought for voting rights for Black people and not women. With this statement, Stanton—long enshrined as a heroic figure in the suffrage movement—disregarded that half of Black people are women and summarized an attitude that remained common among suffragists throughout the late 19th century and into the 20th. Rather than advocating for voting rights for all adult Americans, Stanton argued that “we educated, virtuous white women are more worthy of the vote.”

The racism of Stanton and other activists was amplified by a sense, after slavery’s end, that either women or Black men could gain the right to vote, but not both. Earlier in the century, Black and white women had sometimes worked side by side; as early as the 1830s, cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia all had female anti-slavery societies, in which diverse groups of women expressed their political ideals. Abolitionism provided a natural segue to suffrage for the civic-minded citizen, as activists initiated the United States’ centuries-long transformation from a country that categorically privileged white men above all others to a more egalitarian nation. But suffragists splintered over whether to support the 15th amendment, which granted voting rights to Black men. Wendell Phillips, president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, famously referred to this post-slavery period as “the Negro’s hour” for voting rights. Much of the writing from this period assumes “Black” to be male and “woman” to be white, so Phillips’ declaration implies that white women will have to wait their turn and leaves Black women out of the discourse altogether.
Stanton went further than ignoring the needs of Black women; she actively sought to deny men of color their rights by suggesting that their lack of education made them less qualified to participate in democracy. Again debating Frederick Douglass at a convention in 1869, she opined, “think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung-Tung, who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling book...making laws for Susan B. Anthony. The amendment creates an antagonism everywhere between educated, refined women and the lower orders of men, especially in the South.”

It’s hardly surprising, given attitudes like these, that although the 19th amendment—ratified in 1920—technically granted all women the right to vote, women of color faced obstacles for many decades afterwards. In the South, people had to wait up to 12 hours to register, which proved impossible for those working long hours to earn a meager living. Officials also subjected Southerners to literacy tests, often requiring specific knowledge about the state Constitutions, which many could not pass because they’d had little access to education. Some states also required aspiring voters to pay poll taxes. The theoretical right to vote meant little in practice; Black women and men needed another wave of activism, and more legislation, before they could participate fully in their democracy.

They would have to wait another 40 years before the national sentiment tipped in their favor; it wasn’t until the 1960s that the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. It was then that Fannie Lou Hamer, a woman in her 40s who had spent her life toiling on a plantation, took up the cause after making her first attempt to vote. Although the 19th Amendment had passed when Hamer was three years old, she’d lived decades of her life without knowing it applied to her. “I had never heard until 1962,” Hamer said later, “that Black people could register and vote.” Although she could read well, Hamer failed a literacy test, only passing it on her third attempt after studying esoteric details of the Mississippi Constitution. She made it her mission to advocate for voting rights, becoming an important catalyst for the rapid social change that characterized the era.

In June 1964, three civil rights workers, who had volunteered to help Blacks register to vote in Mississippi, disappeared. The FBI later recovered their bodies, and indicted sixteen members of the Ku Klux Klan in the murders. It was a high-profile crime that even more clearly brought the issue of voting rights into focus. That same year, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited unequal application of voter registration requirements. This was followed in 1965 by the Voting Rights Act, which prohibited literacy tests and provided federal monitoring to ensure that no localities took measures to discourage or prevent specific groups from voting.

By this time, 19th century activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton were long dead—many, like Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, had died before the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Their laudable efforts to achieve suffrage earned them a spot as heroes in countless history textbooks. But how can we idolize women who saw Blacks as inferior and considered voting rights a zero sum game?
A Post-Umbrella America: Fullpage 1
Voter Suppression Since 2013
by LIAM COLLIER

In 1965, after decades of relentless work by civil rights activists and a fiery speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention by Fannie Lou Hamer, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. As Vanessa Willoughby put it in her 2019 article “What Does Voter Suppression Look Like Today?”, the VRA “was a way to reinforce the 15th Amendment, which prevented the federal government from denying a U.S. citizen’s right to vote ‘on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.””

The landmark legislation achieved these ends using a pair of interlocking provisions. Section 4b, which created a set of rules known as a “coverage formula” to identify nine states with histories of voter suppression; and Section 5, which required any significant changes to voting and election systems in those states to be approved by the Justice Department or a federal court: a process known as preclearance.

In 2015, the Brennan Center, a nonpartisan law and policy institute based in Manhattan, described the Voting Rights Act as “one of the most successful civil rights laws in our nation’s history.” Within a decade, “the gap between white and black registration rates dropped from nearly 30 percentage points in the early 1960s to just eight by the 1970s” and “the black-white turnout gap in the South...was effectively eliminated.”

Nevertheless, in 2013 the Supreme Court ruled in Shelby County v. Holder that Section 4b of the VRA was unconstitutional. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts argued that “the Act imposes current burdens and must be justified by current needs.” In other words, Roberts reasoned that the coverage formula used to determine which states should undergo preclearance was outdated. Since racial disparities had decreased since 1965, Roberts believed that states should be released from federal oversight.

In her dissent, the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued that “throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”

The results of the Supreme Court’s decision were swift and devastating.
Voter ID Laws

Within twenty-four hours of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott announced that a 2011 voter ID law, which had previously been blocked in preclearance, would immediately go into effect.

Voter ID laws require individuals to show certain forms of ID in order to vote in elections. As Ashoka Mukpo, a reporter at the ACLU, explained in 2018, “voter ID requirements suppress turnout, particularly by voters of color, who are statistically less likely than white voters to have an ID that satisfies the legal requirements.” In fact, “nationally, up to 25 percent of Black citizens of voting age lack government-issued photo ID, compared with only 8 percent of white citizens.” Supporters of voter ID laws will often justify these measures as necessary to prevent “voter fraud” despite extensive research that finds “fraud by voters at the polls is vanishingly rare”.

Texas is just one of the fourteen states that have imposed stricter voter ID requirements since the 2010 midterms when Republicans successfully took control of twenty state legislatures. Many of these restrictions went into effect after the Supreme Court’s ruling in 2013, including a particularly restrictive voter ID law in Wisconsin, which “kept tens of thousands of eligible voters from the polls and likely tipped the state to Trump”.

Voter Purges

Between the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, “the Justice Department objected to 177 election rule changes across Georgia,” according to a 2019 investigation by APR Reports. Shortly after the state was released from the VRA’s preclearance requirements, Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp purged more than 300,000 registered voters from the state’s voting rolls, forcing them to re-register or lose their right to vote in the 2018 election.

According to the ACLU, “seventy percent of Georgia voters purged in 2018 were Black”, and the majority were from Democratic precincts. When Brian Kemp ran for Governor the following year, he defeated his Democratic challenger Stacey Abrams by just over 1%, approximately 55,000 votes. Had she won, Abrams would have been the first Black female governor in the United States. Due to ongoing voter suppression, Black women in America will not have a governor who looks like them until at least 2021.

Approximately one third of the individuals Kemp purged from Georgia’s rolls were removed through the state’s “use it or lose it” policy, which targets “inactive” voters who have not shown up at the polls in two election cycles (nine years). In Ohio and Wisconsin, similar purges have removed hundreds of thousands of voters from their voter rolls.

Limiting Access

In 2013, Arizona — a state that Garrett Epps of...
Atlantic once described as “the Mississippi of the 21st Century” — was given free reign to implement changes to their voting and election systems. Within three years, the Republican-controlled state government had closed polling locations in 13 of Arizona’s 15 counties. A study by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights found that in “Maricopa County, which is 31 percent Latino, [Arizona Republicans] closed 171 voting locations since 2012 — the most of any county studied and more than the two next largest closers combined.”

Closing polling places creates a bottleneck effect, which increases wait times for voters. In 2016, voters in Maricopa County waited up to five hours to cast their vote in the presidential primary. For working class voters, lost time often means lost wages. As Joshua F.J. Inwood and Derek H. Alderman explained in their 2020 article “Closing Polling Places is the 21st Century’s Version of a Poll Tax”, “a working person may feel pressure to leave a polling place before casting a ballot, just to get to work on time and keep the money coming in.” Those who stick around may also be discouraged from voting in the future. According to one Harvard study, “200,000 people didn’t vote in 2014 because of the lines they encountered in 2012.”

Arizona is not the only state limiting access to the ballot box. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights found in 2019 that “1,688 polling sites across 13 states [had] closed in the six years since the Shelby v. Holder decision.”

Reductions in polling places are just one way that state governments have limited voter access. Reducing early voting options, criminalizing get out the vote efforts, and refusing to expand vote-by-mail in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic all have similar effects: increased wait times, which are disproportionately borne by people of color.

The Good News

When the Supreme Court ruled on the Voting Rights Act in 2013, they did not strike down the bill as a whole. Instead, in a 5-4 decision, they ruled that the coverage formula used to determine which states require preclearance was outdated. Theoretically, Congress could pass a bill with a new formula at any point, and restore the Voting Rights Act to its former glory. This bill would need to be ratified by both houses and signed by the President in order to become law.

In March 2019, Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama introduced the Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would create a new coverage formula. The act quickly passed in the Democratically-controlled House of Representatives but has not yet been brought to a vote in the Republican-controlled Senate.

In 2019, Democrats also introduced the For the People Act, a sweeping voting rights bill that take several steps to remove barriers to voting, including establishing automatic voter registration, making election day a federal holiday, prohibiting “voter purges that kick eligible voters off the registration rolls,” and “[expanding] early voting and [simplifying] absentee voting.” Like the Voting Rights Advancement Act, this act was passed by the House but was never brought to a vote in the Senate.

Despite the best efforts of many conservative lawmakers, the overwhelming majority of bills introduced in the latest legislative session expanded voting rights, according to a thorough analysis by the Brennan Center. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, thirteen states including Mississippi, Missouri, and Virginia have expanded access to vote-by-mail. Eight have eased voter ID requirements and twelve have expanded opportunities for early voting.

Despite these gains, the fight for the right to vote continues. As Fannie Lou Hamer said back in 1971, “nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”
The “Soul of the Movement” - From Spirituals to Freedom Songs
by QUENNA L. BARRETT

In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang — the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words. ‘Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom’ is a sentence that needs no music to make its point. We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that ‘We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.’

— Martin Luther King Jr.

I recently learned that “Which Side Are You On?”, one my favorite protest songs of the current Movement for Black Lives, was first written in the 1930s as a labor movement song. Protest chants and songs like those that appear in Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak on It! have a long history in the Black movement legacy and are connected to the earliest forms of Black music in this country.

**Spirituals**

Spirituals are religious folk songs that were first developed during the enslavement of Black people in the United States. Slaves brought to the Americas during the 17th century from Africa were stripped of their religious cultures and practices, of which music was a great part, as slaveowners believed these religious practices posed a threat to their own Christian values. As enslaved Africans began to be Christianized, early spirituals emerged. Before they were able to worship publicly, they sang songs of both sorrow and joy in secret plantation “meeting houses”. These songs emphasized the parallels between Bible parables and their own lives, with the lyrics speaking to the conditions of enslavement.
NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN
NOBODY KNOWS BUT JESUS
NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN
GLORY, HALLELUJAH
(NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN)

MARY, DON’T YOU WEEP
AND MARTHA DON’T YOU MOAN
MARY, DON’T YOU WEEP
AND MARTHA DON’T YOU MOAN;
PHARAOH’S ARMY GOT DROWN-ED.
OH MARY DON’T YOU WEEP.
I THINK EVERY DAY AND I WISH I COULD,
STAND ON THE ROCK WHERE MOSES STOOD.
OH, PHARAOH’S ARMY GOT DROWN-ED.
OH, MARY DON’T YOU WEEP.
(MARY DON’T YOU WEEP)

Some spirituals also spoke to the justice of God from an enslaved perspective and were an early form of resistance on plantations. These songs spoke of a God who saw the plight of the oppressed, and offered a counter narrative to the slaveowners’ use of Christian scriptures to support the cause of slavery. Spirituals were also an act of resistance and rebellion in that they continued the history of oral storytelling of African cultures when reading and writing was forbidden to slaves.

Another subversive function of early Black spirituals was to lead enslaved people to paths of freedom. It is presumed, although not proven, that some songs included language that held messages connecting or leading to the Underground Railroad. According to Sarah Bradford’s *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, “Go Down, Moses” was one song by Harriet Tubman used as a code as she helped slaves escape. With this use of spirituals as guides, spirituals were being employed as freedom songs long before the Civil Rights Movement.

### From Spirituals to Protest Songs

Spirituals were the basis for protest songs in a number of other ways. In style, they are both characterized by circular rhythms, employing repetition, and a call and response necessary for the movement of the song. Protest songs, or freedom singing, emerged during the Civil Rights Movement and came to be seen as a tool for organizing. In the 1950s and 1960s, members of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) taught people songs, hoping to ease some of the fear and tension aroused by protests and callouts of the injustice faced by Black people. Many of these songs were traditional Black church songs. Like church music, these songs invited people to participate; to clap, sing, and sway along. Some freedom choirs began to ever so slightly change the lyrics to be more pointed to the location or moment they
were in. Bettie Mare Fikes, a SNCC organizer who would become the “voice of the Selma Movement”, stated, “I was thinking about Selma’s sheriff, Jim Clark, and so I sang, ‘Tell Jim Clark, I’m going to let it shine,’ next I used the head of the state troopers, Al Lingo, and put him in the next verse.”

Another record recalls how these lyrics would be changed depending on the circumstance:

“If ordered to disperse, our reply might be, We shall not, we shall not be moved... When placed under arrest, we answered with, Paul and Silas, bound in jail... When they brought out the dogs, we countered with verses like, Ain’t scared of your dogs ‘cause we want our freedom... When we were really scared, we sang, Before I’ll be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave... And when our hearts were heavy with grief, we eased our pain with, We’ll never turn back, no we’ll never turn back...”

A formal Freedom Singers group began in 1962, with its original members all students under the age of 21. They traveled through the South singing call and response spirituals, performing everywhere from jails to churches to parties to marches. One main function of freedom singing was to educate other Black people on issues and freedoms they had been denied, such as the right to vote. Another main function, drawing on the spirituality embedded in the music, was to encourage protestors as they faced verbal and physical attacks. Because freedom songs required the participation of all in a group, they underlined the importance of unity as a crucial part of the movement. Organizers and leaders who gathered and trained at the Highlander Center, a longstanding center for movement work in Tennessee, also exchanged and developed movement songs. It was there that the song “We Shall Overcome”, often labeled “the anthem of the Freedom Movement,” evolved; from a work song sung by field slaves entitled “I’ll be Alright, Someday” and first published in 1901 as “I’ll Overcome Someday”, to the version we know today. Fannie and Freedom Singing

Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the Civil Rights Movement’s freedom singers, using her voice to calm protestors when confronted by police and other violence. She sang songs that she had sung in church all her life, songs that she had learned from her mother. One account of Hamer singing in such a time follows:

“We had brought 17 or 18 people down from Ruleville [to try to register to vote at the courthouse in Indianola]. Amzie Moore had rented this bus that’s used to carry day-workers to the cotton fields. ... Afterwards] everybody gets back on the bus. Well, now it’s getting late. And the driver starts to head back to Ruleville ... and he gets stopped by the deputy sheriff who arrests the driver for driving a bus of the “wrong color.” And that’s when Mrs. Hamer emerged, because she starts to sing. She’s singing these freedom songs: “This Little Light of Mine,” “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.” We hadn’t really noticed Mrs. Hamer ever before. And really, I always thought her singing kind of shored up everybody — even us [SNCC staff]. I mean, ‘cause, you know, you really don’t want to be stuck on the road in Sunflower County [Mississippi] at sunset and identified with Civil Rights. It was pretty scary.” — Charlie Cobb, SNCC

It is logical that spirituals evolved into protest songs: they always were songs of protest. They were enslaved Blacks’ way of secretly and subversively holding onto traditions, resisting and rejoicing in the midst of oppression, and keeping themselves going. Early spirituals, freedom songs of the Civil Rights era, and the protest chants of today have been and continue to be a mode of Black people supporting and directing each other in the way towards freedom.
Cheryl L. West: Her Work and the Playwriting Process

By ABBY WESLEY

“In my family, if you could tell a good story... they liked to see you coming.”

- Cheryl L. West

Who Is Cheryl L. West?

Coming from a long line of storytellers, Cheryl L. West is a playwright originally from Chicago, Illinois, who now calls Seattle, Washington home.

From children’s shows to plays to musicals, her work has graced the stages of numerous regional theatres, including the Goodman (Puddin N’ Pete, Play On!, Pullman Porter Blues). Her plays have also been performed on Broadway, off-Broadway, and internationally.

Why Is She Important?

West is the playwright of Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It! She is the most produced living playwright at Seattle Repertory Theatre and the first African-American woman to win the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. As both an accomplished playwright and woman of color, West advocates for more diversity in theatre for young audiences, calling for a wider range of stories to be told onstage by actors, directors, and playwrights of color, giving voice to stories that are often left out of the overall theatre landscape.

Early Career

Before Cheryl L. West’s journey as a playwright began, she worked as a social worker and teacher and studied journalism. Although newspapers recruited her early on in her career, she decided that she wanted to pursue playwriting full-time and gave herself a timeline of five years to be able to support herself financially. When speaking on this decision in an interview with Seattle Rep’s Artistic Director, Braden Abraham, West remarked that she wanted to write fiction because “you don’t have to hurt people and I felt in journalism sometimes you had to make those choices, and they hurt people.”

In 1987, West won the opportunity to participate in the Group Theatre’s Multicultural Playwrights Festival, which she credits as launching her career. She workedshopped her first play Before It Hits Home at this festival. West succeeded in supporting herself financially as a playwright within the fourth year of her timeline when her first play was produced.
Her Process

Since West is often balancing five or six projects at any given time, she works closely with dramaturgs to help shape her understanding of the world her characters live in. In an interview with Courtney Sale, the Nancy L. Donahue Artistic Director at Merrimack Repertory Theatre, West revealed that her writing process includes “10-15 rewrites before it sees a workshop” and that the collaborative process with directors, actors, and other creatives “teaches you what the play is trying to be.”

West also detailed how writing new work not only takes craft, but an immense amount of courage. When asked if she knows what she is capable of when she begins to write a play, West responded: “I know I have what it takes to complete a piece of work, but sometimes that piece of work eludes you at that moment, and sometimes you have to put it aside and work on something else. And it might just be because you’re afraid of it. It might be your most honest work, and you’re not ready for that yet.”

The honesty in West’s work has caused immense controversy over the years. In an interview with Marcie Sillman, West revealed that she “took a lot of heat” for her 1990 play Before It Hits Home, which West describes as the first play about the AIDS crisis told from a Black perspective. For that, she received backlash including death threats, according to Willa Taylor, the Walter Director of Education and Engagement at the Goodman, who was working on a production of Before It Hits Home at the Public Theater in 1992. Despite this, West continues to write work that she feels is vital at this moment.

Her Work

Many of Cheryl L. West’s plays revisit difficult moments in history, allowing audiences to consider the historical contexts of the problems we are facing today. Her adaptation of The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 focuses on the events surrounding the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It! examines the Civil Rights Movement and Fannie Lou Hamer’s trailblazing efforts to ensure that Black Americans were able to register to vote in Mississippi.

Describing the process of writing about historical figures, West remarked, “I like to do these unsung hero pieces because they help me on my own courage journey.” When speaking about her piece on Fannie Lou Hammer, she added, “she was one of the most incredible folk heroes that America ever produced.”

Music is another prevalent theme in many of West’s plays. Specific songs are listed as part of the piece to help visualize time and place. Songs such as “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” and “Okie Dokie Stomp” in The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 and “This Little Light of Mine” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” in Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It! encapsulate the sound and shape of the lives of the people from these times.

When talking about the ideal audience for her work, specifically new work, West visualizes them as possessing “a level of curiosity about a story outside of their direct experience, and yet in coming to that story, they discover their own humanity.” West’s storytelling capabilities allow even those who are unfamiliar with the subjects she explores to pursue their own journey to understanding and self-discovery through the worlds of her plays.
“Theatre Must Go to the People”: El Teatro Campesino and the Power of Public Performance
by LIAM COLLIER

When Henry Godinez, the director of Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak on It!, realized that the COVID-19 pandemic would prevent audiences from watching the play at the Goodman, his mind went immediately to Luis Valdez. Valdez is the founder and artistic director of El Teatro Campesino, a California-based Latino theatre company with a long history of public protest art.

“I started to think about how we could get this in front of audiences if we are not able to get audiences into the theater. And I thought of Luis. I thought of Luis Valdez and what Teatro Campesino did in the 1960s when they worked with César Chávez and literally got into a flatbed pickup truck and drove into the migrant fields in California to educate and entertain and inform the farm workers of their rights about pesticides about the things that they could do to improve and better their life.”

Inspired by El Teatro Campesino, Godinez staged this production on a flatbed pickup truck, which will travel to parks around Chicago to bring Fannie Lou Hamer’s message directly to the people.

On September 2nd, 2020, Godinez sat down with Luis Valdez to discuss the origins of El Teatro Campesino, its connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and the role of theatre in social justice movements today. Click the image below to watch.