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Histories for Our Present and Future Struggles - Panel 3

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HISTORIES FOR OUR PRESENT AND FUTURE STRUGGLES – PANEL III

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"Working out how to build democratic movements and institutions in the South and beyond requires understanding the impact of oppressive systems on people, from those people …"

I met Fran around 2006 through Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee,[2] and since then I've studied and written about movements and campaigns that Fran was part of, from women's liberation movements to working-class struggles in the Appalachian South—often led by women.[3] I interviewed Fran in 2009 and 2010 as part of the Long Women's Movement Project at the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill,[4] and the following is drawn in part from those interviews, followed by my reflections about what I've learned from Fran about how and why history matters for the democratic movements we need in the present and future.

Born in 1946, Fran grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, the daughter of college-educated parents who supported their daughter's budding intellectual curiosity. Although her parents were not deeply involved in movements, they supported her participation in alternative spaces for youth, including a socially progressive theater club called Actor's Lab, run by the wife of an Emory University philosophy professor. Through it she encountered children of civil rights activists, international students, and Black intellectuals. She recalled being exposed to "Yankee worlds, Bohemian worlds, and worlds of Black people living in Atlanta." After *Brown v. Board* but before desegregation, she also participated in a Quaker-run program to bring together Black and white youth. She described her teen years as "a combination of being very embedded in a Southern setting that was full of reality [meaning racial segregation], but also having outside

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1. Ph.D., Associate Professor, Joyce and Stuart Robbins Chair, West Virginia University

2. Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee "is a coalition of labor unions, faith groups and community organizations working together to advance economic justice in Knoxville and surrounding communities." For more information, visit https://www.jwjet.org/.

3. JESSICA WILKERSON, TO LIVE HERE, YOU HAVE TO FIGHT: HOW WOMEN LED APPALACHIAN MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE (2019).

4. THE LONG WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, UNC, https://cdh.unc.edu/prsp-record/the-long-womens-movement/.

influences penetrating and fertilizing and opening up the idea that there were alternatives and different ways."

Fran made her way to college at Harvard-Radcliffe in the fall of 1964, and she was soon swept into liberation struggles unfolding across the country, beginning with the civil rights movement. One day, she was sitting in her dorm room and a white student from Ohio, who wore pearls and had a pageboy haircut, came to her room and asked her if she wanted to donate money to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Fran was curious but also troubled that this person *not from the South* was telling her how to support people in the region of the country from which she hailed. She decided that night that she had to go back to Atlanta come summer and "figure out what's going on." She contacted the Quaker House, where she had attended interracial gatherings, and she soon found her way to Vine City Council, an antipoverty organization in a historically Black neighborhood in Atlanta where she encountered members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Like many organizers of her generation, she soon was active not only in the civil rights movement, but in what historian Van Gosse has called a "movement of movements."[5]

When Fran returned to school in the fall, she joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), through which she met people who had been in Mississippi Freedom Summer, and others who had grown up in leftist families. Over the next three years, she dove into the struggle. During her junior year, she took a year off to join the Economic Research & Action Project of SDS, a community organizing project focused on poor people collectively working together to determine their needs. That brought her into contact with working-class white people living in Appalachian migrant neighborhoods in Cleveland and Chicago, where she organized alongside welfare rights activists. When she returned to Harvard in 1968, she served as the SDS chapter's co-president and helped to organize the occupation of University Hall to protest racism, militarism, and the escalation of violence in Vietnam.

In 1969, Fran's movement circles expanded once again when she joined the Boston women's liberation group Bread & Roses, Collective Number One. Bread & Roses was one of the innovators of consciousness-raising—the feminist practice of collectively discussing and organizing around everyday forms of sexism, racism, and classism. She and the members took up various overlapping causes,

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5. VAN GOSSE, THE MOVEMENTS OF THE NEW LEFT 1950-1975: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH DOCUMENTS (2005).

from anti-war organizing to leafleting secretarial offices and addressing male chauvinism in the New Left. She also contributed to the first edition of what would become *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, now a classic in women's health.[6]

Of these years, Fran said "All of this was a process," but that she always had "a desire to come back to the South and a belief that that's where [she] was headed eventually." And she also held a "belief" that the best organizing was "from the bottom up."

These two themes—the centrality of the South for democratic struggle, and the importance of organizing with people who are most affected—are core themes in Fran's life and career.

In the early 1970s, as Black organizers focused on self-determination, white civil rights activists considered how to build support for movements for Black civil rights and economic justice among working-class whites in the South. Fran and her husband Jim looked for an organizing base and soon chose Knoxville, with its proximity to the Highlander Research and Education Center, where Jim would serve as director in the 1990s. Fran attended law school in Knoxville and went into private practice, taking on cases mostly related to occupational safety and health. She then returned to Harvard, where she earned a masters in law and then started a position as a law professor at the University of Tennessee. From there, she routinely sought out community engaged, participatory research. Over the course of her career, Fran has participated in labor rights campaigns, union organizing, protests against globalization and precarious work, and organizing for immigrant rights, all in the South. She recognized the grassroots campaigns emerging around her, and she went to them with her skills, talents, and energy because she understood that *if we can't figure out democracy in the South, then we can't really figure it out anywhere.*

Working out how to build and grow democratic movements and institutions in the South and beyond requires understanding the impact of oppressive systems on people, from those people. Fran's approach to organizing and community-engaged scholarship takes seriously the lessons of popular education that institutions like Highlander have developed: that it is imperative to strategize collectively about how to build a more just world. Among Fran's many interventions, she has consistently worked to preserve working-class people's stories and struggles as part of that broader collective effort.

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6. BOSTON WOMEN'S HEALTH BOOK COLLECTIVE, OUR BODIES, OURSELVES (1968).

In 1974, Fran worked with a group of southern organizers and activists on an issue of *Southern Exposure*, at the time a new print magazine founded in 1973 that emerged out of southern liberation movements. Its founders documented political and cultural issues in the South through investigative journalism and oral history. The winter issue of 1974 was titled, "No More Moanin': Voices of Southern Struggle."[7] In the introduction the editors stated that they were not interested in so-called definitive histories, but in the search for southern histories that were typically distorted, erased, or ignored. They hunted and found stories about how people fought "for the right to lead decent and productive lives."[8] The issue included articles about the Knoxville Race Riot of 1919, textile workers' labor strikes in the 1920s, folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, sharecropper organizing, and progressive religious traditions in the South, as well as oral history interviews of people who had been enslaved.[9] In a significant article about historical methodology, historian and activist Vincent Harding wrote about different approaches to history: White History is a history that deludes, is all encompassing; it is a justification for violence and empire; and it is unable and unwilling to deal with structural racism and inequalities.[10] Black History, he wrote, "is not just about black people" but is about "seeing all of America through black eyes, about placing our definition not only on the black experience, but on the entire experience" in completely new ways.[11] He continued that this approach to history "calls for a new move by which we define not only what the past has been, but what the future will be."[12] Storytelling and bottom-up history that, as Harding describes, points us toward democratic struggle has been key to Fran's own orientation to a more just future.

Fran's contribution to this volume was through documentary and oral history of working-class activism in Appalachian Tennessee.[13] She and Brenda Bell were in possession of interviews about a series of miners' insurrections over Tennessee's use of convict labor in coal mines between 1891-93. Fran and Brenda created a timeline of convict labor—a system that southern politicians used to

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7. *No More Moanin' Voices of Southern Struggle*, 1 S. EXPOSURE 1 (1974).
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*
10. *Id.* at 51.
11. *Id.* at 57.
12. *Id.*
13. *East Tennessee Coal Mining Battles, in No More Moanin' Voices of Southern Struggle*, 1 S. EXPOSURE 1, 112 (1974).

re-enslave Black people in the late 19th century—and how white miners protested the system, thus locating an example of the possibilities for interracial class solidarity. They also conducted oral history interviews with twenty-four men and women who had been involved in miners' strikes for workers' rights in the 1930s and pieced together a narrative based on the interviews.

Fran and Brenda discussed their motive: to preserve the history of the struggle, but also "to learn and save some of the history of our area—not just the history of famous and powerful individuals, but the history of common people, working people."[14] They didn't try to be "neutral," they explained.[15] "We believe that working people and poor people need to get together to gain a better living and a say over their own lives."[16] Lastly, they took seriously the creative innovations and material culture of working-class people, interviewing songwriters who had documented life and struggle in the coalfields through song lyrics.

Fran's approach to history and social justice, and her commitment to documenting and preserving these stories of struggle, span her career. The themes that she and Brenda foregrounded and their approach to preserving working people's histories and democratic struggle show up in the many campaigns and participatory research projects that Fran has supported over the last fifty years. And I'm happy to say that many more people can read those stories and learn about her strategies in her papers, which she recently donated to the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University.

I'll close by summarizing what I've learned from Fran and how she (and the movements in which she was part) have shaped my own approach to historical methods:

- The importance of accountability to working-class and racial justice movements; and that it's imperative that we support, rather than extract from, communities who have been on the margins of dominant historical narratives. In fact, I think it's fair to say that Fran has always been an activist and organizer first, and academic second. For instance, of her decision to work with TN Industrial Renewal Network, which we learned about during this symposium, she recalled that it was a "life-line"—a way to connect her "work-for-hire" with her "values"—and a movement that would hold her accountable.

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14. *Id.* at 114.
15. *Id.*
16. *Id.*

- The importance of using our platforms to help to create spaces for people who are most affected by policies, legislative decisions, pollution and toxic dumping, deindustrialization, exploitation of labor, racism, sexism, nativism, and on and on. One of my favorite pieces of writing by Fran is her article in the *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* on the struggle over NAFTA.[17] In it, she published a brief sketch of the debates surrounding NAFTA, followed by transcripts of the speeches protesting free trade made by various people, including factory workers and labor activists like Luvernel Clark and Shirley Reinhardt, before the Trade Staff Policy Committee. The women shared their biographies, how their lives had been disrupted by deindustrialization, and how they had been organizing with women workers at the southern border and in Mexico to build solidarity movements. Their appearance in this journal therefore makes available the "public range of voices that might not otherwise be widely heard."[18] Fran helped to document those testimonies and create that space for protest.
- Bearing witness: Lately, I've thought a lot about oral history as bearing witness to people's struggles, their everyday lives, and their attempts to envision and create a better society. Fran, unlike so many in academia, has always shown a deep respect for working-class stories and how people create meaning out of events and history. She documented stories, and that alone is important. But she also often took a next step, developing her own scholarly analysis and interpretation from what she learned in collaboration with people.
- Fran's life and career reveals the importance of organizing in the South in the past and present. In recent months, Tennessee legislators have passed anti-LGBTQ laws and expelled young Black legislators, Justin Jones and Justin J. Pearson, who protested gun violence in the aftermath of the latest mass shooting. The disciplining of Jones and Pearson is the latest in a long history of anti-Black racism, state violence, and a reassertion of white power. A recent political science study ranked Tennessee last in democratic health.[19] What we know, however, is that the existence and strength of anti-democratic politics in the South does not mean that people aren't working hard to expand democracy, especially Black, immigrant, poor, working class, and queer people. We owe it to them to document

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17. Frances Lee Ansley, *North American Free Trade Agreement: The Public Debate*, 22 GA. J. INT'L & COMP. L. 329 (1992).

18. *Id.* at 333.

19. Jacob M. Grumbach, *Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding*, 117 AMER. POL. SCI. REV. 967 (2022)

and help to interpret their movements that might otherwise be blotted out in the dominant narrative. We owe it to each other to document not only *what happened*, but also the history of *what people believed was possible*.