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Fran Ansley's Tennessee Posse for Peace and Justice

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FRAN ANSLEY'S TENNESSEE POSSE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

CHARLES LAWRENCE III¹

I am so happy to be here with you good people as you celebrate my sister in the movement Fran Ansley and her wondrous life and work as a teacher, scholar, freedom fighter, troublemaker, and lover. I am also sad that I am not there with you in person, where I could hug Fran and meet her family, her buddies, and the posse that rides with her in the good fight and parties with her too. COVID has kept me from travel the last three years, as Mari's cancer and my age have made us high risk for serious infection and therefore extra careful. We are restricted to Zoom sightings of our favorite people, and occasional joyful outdoor meals on our lanai with friends who come to Hawaii. Fran tempted me greatly when she promised that, if I came in person, we could trace my family's roots in East Tennessee, but now I am jumping ahead of myself.

The Law Review's editors tell me that Fran has frequently reminded them that she must not be the focus of the symposium. I will do my best to abide by the spirit of modesty and commitment to community reflected in Fran's request, but I will begin with a story about Fran and about my recent reconnection with and rediscovery of her, as it is that reconnection that has set me to thinking anew about the challenges and joys of the movement work that has been Fran's vocation and of how much we need that work in our current hard times.

I will tell some other stories along the way. I have always told and listened to stories as a first step in thinking about and working on hard problems in hard times.² Now that I have lived almost eighty years and my Hawaiian friends call me kupuna, one of the old ones, I make no apology for my storytelling.

At the outset I will tell you what I am trying to puzzle out as I tell these stories. I have been despairing these last many months at the potency of the latest backlash—the rash of legislation banning books, curricula, teaching critical race theory, or any mention or discussion of our country's racism, past and present, the most extreme restrictions on abortion, the attacks on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and

1. Professor of Law Emeritus, William S. Richardson School of Law; Centennial Professor Emeritus, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

2. See Charles Lawrence III, *Listening for Stories in All the Right Places: Narrative and Racial Formation Theory*, 46 L. & SOC'Y R. 247 (2012) (describing how when professional people of color speak, they engage in a political project of "racial-reconstruction").

transgender children. Despairing may be too strong a word, but I've definitely got what Nina Simone called "The Backlash Blues."³ I am troubled and frustrated by how quickly and easily Trump, DeSantis, and the good old boys in the Kentucky, Texas, and Tennessee legislatures can run the same old con game,⁴ how quickly the backlash comes on the heels of what some were calling a "racial awakening," when our young people marched by the millions in the streets shouting "Black Lives Matter," organizing, teaching, learning, and speaking truth to power, helping us recognize again the beauty and strength of our humanity, that together we could alter the conditions of our lives.⁵

One set of pieces in my puzzle has to do with the role that denial has played in the propagation and endurance of the viral sicknesses and violence of racism, patriarchy, militarism, and capitalism. We justify our refusal to remedy racism, patriarchy, and poverty by denying their existence. I have called the Supreme Court's refusal to see our sickness "the Big Lie."⁶ Now state legislatures ban the

3. Nina Simone, *Backlash Blues* on *Nina Simone Sings the Blues* (RCA Records 1967).

4. Hannah Natanson, et al., *An Explosion of Culture War Laws is Changing Schools. Here's How*, WASH. POST (Oct. 18, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/10/18/education-laws-culture-war/>. At least 25 states have passed 64 laws in the last three academic years reshaping what children can learn and do at school. Florida has already passed several such laws, including the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," which prohibits certain ways of teaching about race. FLA. STAT. § 760.10. Another is the "Parental Rights in Education" law, dubbed "don't say gay," which forbids teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation. FLA. STAT. § 1001.42.

5. Charles Lawrence, *Black Lives Matter and the Last Reconstruction: A Letter to my Younger Siblings in the Streets*, MEDIUM (Dec. 14, 2020), https://medium.com/@charleslawrence_61160. I know that backlash always follows each victory, that backlash is evidence that those who oppose our freedom are frightened and striking back. I think that my frustration comes because I have always believed that, over time, more folks will come to see that freedom for Black and brown people, for women, for gays and lesbians is the same as their own, and this belief is now challenged.

6. Charles Lawrence & Mari Matsuda, *The Big Lie: Colorblindness and the Taboo Against Honest Talk About Race*, in *WE WON'T GO BACK: MAKING THE CASE FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION* 67–90 (1997). Elsewhere I have discussed how the denial of historical and continuing societal racism has been central to the Supreme Court's failed interpretation and realization of the Reconstruction Amendments' promise and imperative to affirmatively disestablish the ideology, laws, practices, and structures

teaching of our shared history, fearful that if our children know the truth about the origins and chronic presence of these diseases they will demand a cure.

What has been pejoratively called “identity politics” seems another part of this puzzle. I believe it is right and useful to name ourselves Black, Asian, woman, queer, migrant, union member, Critical Race Theorist, socialist, etc.⁷ But, in these times of right-wing backlash, I also worry that right-wing pseudo-populists have so easily appropriated and intentionally misconstrued identity politics to turn it against us and turn us against one another. I think there is something about the way that Fran has worked and lived with, within, among, and across our many identities that may help me with my worry and my puzzle.

OK, that’s all the preamble I plan to offer. I will get on with my stories and you can see if they help you with the puzzle.

put in place in service of slavery and white supremacy. See, e.g., Charles Lawrence, *Implicit Bias in the age of Trump*, 133 HARV. L. REV. 2304, 2039-2042 (2020).

7. Thirty years ago, Fran wrote an article that she titled *A Civil Rights Agenda for the Year 2000: Confessions of an Identity Politician*. She thoughtfully canvassed both the good and important features of identity politics and its dangers. Ultimately, as her title suggests, she counts herself among “us identity politicians.” She closes this article by noting that the stubborn racism (sexism and homophobia) of large segments of the electorate “has prevented those segments from making common cause with people of color” (women and LTBTQ communities) and by suggesting that people who choose to engage in identity politics “should consciously and as a matter of principle consider the perspectives, the experiences, and the political needs of those members of our identity group who are least privileged. We should conceive our problems and design our reform strategies with their needs and perspectives firmly in mind.” Fran Ansley, *A Civil Rights Agenda for the Year 2000: Confessions of an Identity Politician*, 59 TENN. L. REV. 593 (1992). See also my own discussion of identity politics in *Acting Our Color: Racial Re-Construction and Identity as Acts of Resistance*. (noting “Matsuda names this concept of racial identity, defined by shared politics of antisubordination, ‘progressive essentialism.’ This name reminds us that the problem lies not in embracing any essential identity. Rather, we must choose the essential identity of justice seekers.”) Charles Lawrence, *Acting Our Color: Racial Re-Construction and Identity as Acts of Resistance*, 18 UCLA ASIAN PAC. AM. L.J. 21, 34 (2012) (citing Mari J. Matsuda, *Critical Race Theory*, in *WHERE IS YOUR BODY?: AND OTHER ESSAYS ON RACE, GENDER, AND THE LAW* at xii (1997)).

Story One: "Blessed"

I am on a walk with my big dog in a beautiful valley called Mānoa, where I came with Mari Matsuda 15 years ago to live and work as teachers and join another tributary of what Vincent Harding called the "river of liberation,"⁸ albeit a tributary in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.⁹

My phone rings, and when I answer I hear Fran's lovely voice. She has called to ask me to speak at this symposium. I have not seen or talked with Fran for over twenty years, but it feels like a much shorter time than that. I'm remembering how much I like this person, remembering how happy I'd be to see her when I would spot her across the room at an AALS conference¹⁰ or a SALT board meeting.¹¹ I'd want to go to the panel where she was presenting, or better yet, sit next to

8. VINCENT HARDING, *THERE IS A RIVER: THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN AMERICA*, at xviii–xxi, 82 (1981) (recounting the history of Black radicalism in America).

9. GARY OKIHIRO, *ISLAND WORLD: A HISTORY OF HAWAII AND THE UNITED STATES* (2008) (contesting the customary narrative in which the United States acts upon and dominates Hawai'i and centering the narrative in the Pacific depicting the islands' press against the continent, endowing America's story with fresh meaning.) Mari grew up here and her mother's family has lived in Hawai'i for five generations, but we both live here as guests, collaborators, and hanai (adopted) siblings of our Kanaka neighbors whose sovereignty movement flows at the center of this river branch's currents). See also, CHARLES LAWRENCE, *Activist Genealogy: Visions and Enactments of Solidarity Across Black and Kanaka Maoli Movements*, in *THE VALUE OF HAWAII 3: HULIHIA, THE TURNING* (N. Goodyear, C. Howse, J. Osorio, A. Yamashiro, eds., 2020) (hereinafter "Activist Genealogy").

10. AALS is the Association of American Law Schools, the largest annual gathering of law professors in the country. <https://www.aals.org>.

11. SALT is the Society of American Law Teachers, "a community of progressive law teachers, law school administrators, librarians, academic support experts, students and affiliates ... committed to advancing teaching excellence, social justice and diversity." SALT, *About Salt*, <https://www.saltlaw.org/about-salt/>.

her at lunch, talking serious talk about serious things, and laughing too. The next day, Fran sends me an email with this picture attached.



Picture 1 - Circa 1992

Chuck,

I think I told you that I was unearthing things in my basement and in my old office at the law school. Well, here is a snapshot of a print that swam to the surface yesterday. It was a SALT event of some kind, I think, and someone sent me the picture later. I love what it catches of Mari. And just look at me being blessed by the focus of those beautiful intelligences.

“Blessed” Indeed! Just look at the way all three of these people are listening to Fran. I can only identify two of them,¹² Mari Matsuda and John Calmore, and I will tell you that they are two of the most beautiful intelligences I have known. Look at Mari’s eyes, at John’s

12. After the symposium Fran identified the third person in the photograph as our colleague Angela Gilmore, formerly the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor of Law at North Carolina Central University and currently Senior Accreditation Counsel for the American Bar Association.

posture. Fran calls their focus a “blessing.” She knows the full attention she receives from these very smart people is more than an affirmation of the value of her words and ideas. It is attention to her person, an expression of trust, of mutual care, of common cause in struggle, of love. The blessing we see in this picture goes in both directions. And we are all blessed by what is happening in this conversation. For each participant will carry the blessing away from this encounter and give it away to the rest of us.

I talked with Fran for almost an hour that morning, and, as I began to think about what I might say today, I kept coming back to why I felt so immediately and intimately reconnected, why the conversation made me feel so good.

Part of it was the simple joy of reconnecting with an old friend, but there was something else going on. Over the next couple of weeks Fran and I exchange several emails, partly in preparation for the symposium but mostly because both of us are so enjoying getting reacquainted. Fran sends me a link to access her many publications over the years, a copy of *Singing Across Dark Spaces*, a book chapter that she and her husband Jim wrote about their participation in an occupation that marked a key moment in the 1989 United Mine Workers’ strike in southern Appalachia,¹³ and an Ansley timeline put together for an archive at Duke that will house her papers.

The timeline includes a year-by-year list of her life and family journey from Atlanta, Georgia; to Columbus, Georgia; to Putney, Vermont; to Harvard; to Cleveland and Chicago, to East Tennessee. In a second section titled “Selected organizations and related people” she lists in chronological order some of the groups and people she has worked alongside and who have had “a particularly big impact on her thinking.” As I read, I feel that I am traveling a familiar road. I write back:

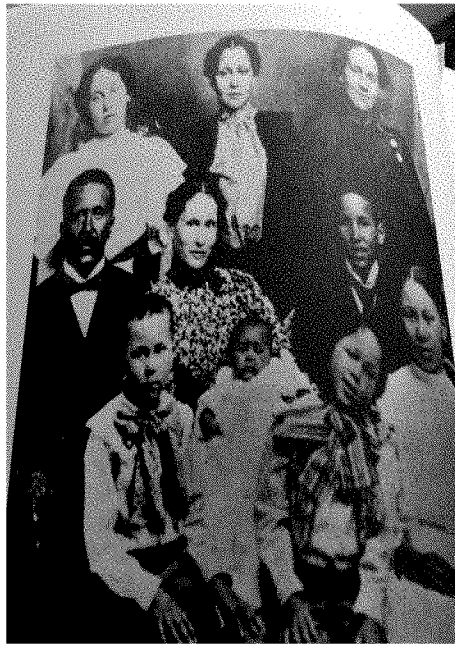
Dear Fran,

As I am beginning to think of what I will say on April 14, I keep thinking about how when we first reconnected after all this time you felt so familiar, so much like an old and dear friend, although, truth be told, we really spent very little time with each other. I’m trying to work out where this feeling comes from. I think that it is because we share a genealogy - not one that can be found in our DNA, but an

13. Jim Sessions and Fran Ansley, *Singing Across Dark Spaces: The Union/Community Takeover of Pittston’s Moss 3 Plant*, in *FIGHTING BACK IN APPALACHIA: TRADITIONS OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE* (Stephen L. Fisher, ed., 1993).

intellectual, political, and spiritual set of ancestors who are in some way related. All of the ways that you have shared my East Tennessee connections - Maryville College, Highlander - so much in your timeline felt like we were following the same river - the Episcopal Church, the Quakers, SDS and SNCC, Vincent and Rosemarie Harding - point toward something I want to say about the politics and community that is needed in these times of "Anti-CRT" "Anti-Woke" "Anti-Trans" and "Divisive Concepts" laws. How about "Freedom" as a concept and a lived reality, a song to sing across these dark spaces?

Story Two: "Social Equality"



Picture 2 - Circa 1895

This is a picture of my great grandfather, Job Childs Lawrence, his wife, Missouri Ann, and the first eight of their nine children. My grandfather, Charles Lawrence I, stands in front with the big bow tied at his collar.

Job Lawrence was born into slavery, to his enslaved mother and her master, in eastern Tennessee. When Job's master lost a considerable sum in a card game, he sold Job to settle the gambling debt. After the Civil War, Job attended Maryville College. He went on to divinity school at Howard and then returned to East Tennessee, serving as chaplain at a freedman's hospital and establishing and pastoring

colored churches along the foothills and valleys of the Great Smoky Mountains. He had a long and fruitful pastorate in Knoxville, Maryville, and Columbia, Tennessee.¹⁴

14. Letter from Charles R. Lawrence II (Feb. 2, 1973) (on file with author). As W.E.B. DuBois wrote of my great grandfather's generation, "The nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of deep

In 1888, Job was elected to the Knoxville school board, to represent the colored population in matters concerning the segregated colored schools. There was an immediate outcry from the town's white populace, and the white board members expelled him from their meetings. The *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, in an editorial with the headline "SOCIAL EQUALITY," called his appointment one that raised "serious questions," including the fact that Lawrence was a graduate of Maryville College, a school that advocated "the co-education of the races" and "trained its students to believe in the idea of social equality of the races as the thing to be desired and that ought to be secured." The tribune editorial noted with alarm that one of the professors at Maryville had even said that the state statute forbidding the intermarriage of the races was "a shame and disgrace to the state." The editorial closed with a call to action: "Let parents arise in their might and nip the coming of mixed schools and mixed everything in the bud. The parents of Knoxville seeing the evil can crush it."¹⁵ Job sued the school board for denying him his seat, but the thinly veiled threat in the editorial was not mere rhetoric in the days of lynch law. He left town fearing for his safety and that of his family.

My great-grandmother, Missouri Anne, was a child born out of wedlock to a prominent young Tennessee politician and the daughter of the president of Maryville College. The two white families, seeking to avoid the shame the news this child's birth might bring to them, secretly gave the baby away to an enslaved woman who raised Missouri Anne as her own.¹⁶

I knew these stories only from my family's oral history, but in my early conversations with Fran she tells me that she has been working with an archivist at Maryville College and they have found documented evidence of my great-grandfather's attendance at

disappointment rests upon the Negro people." W. E. B. DUBOIS, *SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* 5 (1989).

15. *Social Equality*, KNOXVILLE DAILY TRIBUNE (Feb 2, 1888).

16. See Lawrence, *supra* note 6, at 21–25. ("The stated purpose of the anti-miscegenation law that forbade [Job's] marriage to Missouri Anne was to 'prevent a comingling of the races' and the 'corruption of blood.' The law named him 'untouchable' – an unclean contaminant to the purity of white blood. The anti-miscegenation law's story was part of a larger story that justified Job's enslavement by his father and his father's rape of Job's mother. When the white community allowed Job and Missouri Anne to transgress this law it was only because they considered Missouri Anne already contaminated by the Black family who had taken her in as a baby and made her one of their own; because they already saw her as Black.").

Maryville,¹⁷ of his suit challenging his exclusion from the school board,¹⁸ as well as documents that are consistent with and shed more light on my family's account of Missouri Anne's story,¹⁹ and a "Call for a State Convention of Colored Citizens" published in the February 17, 1874 edition of the *Nashville Union and American*. Among the 76 signers from across the state of Tennessee is Job Lawrence.²⁰

Fran wants to know these stories because she is curious, some would say "nosey," about the world. She is a true intellectual. But there's more than intellectual curiosity here and more than nosiness about a friend's family history. Fran wants to know these stories because they are her stories too. They tell a family history of all of you that live, work, and raise your children in East Tennessee. A history that has shaped who we are as individuals and as a community. We are inextricably connected and bound to one another by this shared history. This is true of all Americans, and indeed of all citizens of this planet, but I think it is especially true for those of us with roots in the American South, where sons like Job were the property of their fathers and daughters like Missouri Anne were adopted, raised, and married across the law's color line.

This story of a Maryville College community, that was engaged in the "coeducation of the races" and committed to the "idea of social equality," begins during Reconstruction when, as historian Eric Foner observes, Blacks "challenged the nation to live up to the full implications of its democratic creed and . . . fundamentally altered the Constitution's definition of Citizenship, for all Americans."²¹ But by the time Job is fleeing the Knoxville night riders with his family, the national government and Federal Courts have abandoned the freedom of movement. Blacks' former masters employ fraud, economic

17. Archive of Maryville College Catalog 1873–74, <https://archive.org/details/maryvillecoll187374mary/page/10/mode/2up?q=%22lawrence%2C+job%22>.

18. THE MARYVILLE TIMES, 3rd column, 4th item, (Oct. 23, 1889) <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89058370/1889-10-23/ed-1/seq-4>.

19. See *Receipt from Maryville College Archives*, MARYVILLE COLLEGE (May 24, 1881), (showing payment to Caroline Wallace for her services in cleaning Anderson Hall) (on file with author).

20. *Civil Rights. Call for a State Convention of Colored Citizens*, NASHVILLE UNION AND AMERICAN, 6th column, 1 article, (Feb. 17, 1874), <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1874-02-17/ed-1/seq-1/>.

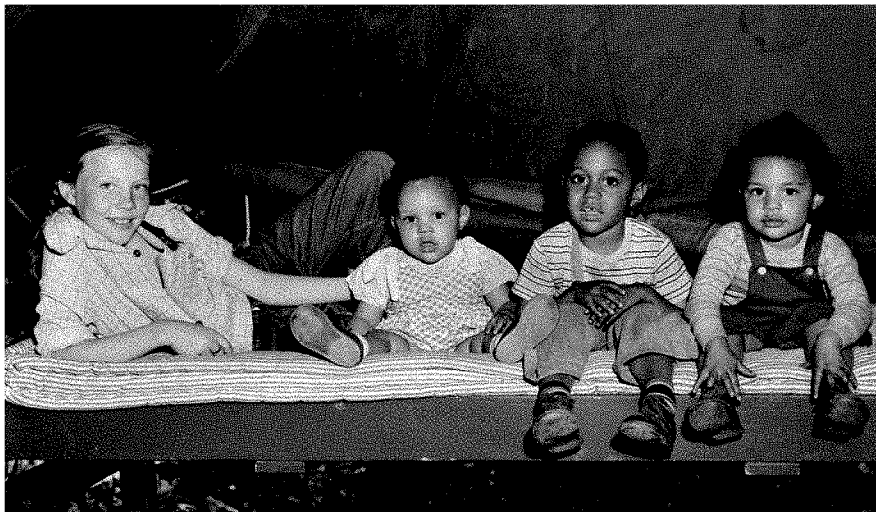
21. Eric Foner, *Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 74 J. OF AMERICAN HISTORY 863, 863 (1987).

coercion, and a reign of terror to strip them of the franchise and economic autonomy in what the South calls its “Redemption.”

Of course, Fran’s recovery of our common history and profound connection to one another is exactly what the anti-CRT, anti-history, anti-woke, anti-choice, and anti-trans laws seek to prevent and deny. The politicians forbid any talk of racism past or present so that they can continue to tell the lie that none exists. It is not just Blacks who must not be allowed to know this history, but their white constituents as well, lest they discover how the sickness of white supremacy has enabled the exploitation of their labor and made them less free and less human - lest they discover that we are all each other’s siblings, parents and ancestors.

Story Three: “All that is unjust”

In the summer of 1946, my young parents packed my sisters and me into an old Willys sedan for a trip across your beautiful foothills from Nashville to the Highlander Folk School, then located in Monteagle. Highlander was founded in the 1930’s as a leadership training institute for those called to the ways of justice-seeking and peacemaking. It was the only place in the South in those years in which, in defiance of Jim Crow laws, Blacks and whites regularly met, ate, and talked together as equals. I know that Fran and Jim have close associations with Highlander today, and I send her these pictures.





Picture 3 - Highlander Folk School, 1946

Fran replies:

Oh my goodness, these pictures are wonderful. The white man smiling at your father and you three kids on that bench is Myles Horton, one of Highlander's original three founders, as you probably know. I have no idea about who the white folks in these other pictures are, but they look like people I would like to know. Meanwhile, your mother is so drop-dead beautiful it took my breath away.

I did not know the names of these white folks either when I sent the photographs to Fran. I wish my parents were still alive so I could ask them about Myles and about those two unnamed womenfolk. But truth is, I know who they all are. They are Fran and Jim, as seen in their movement ancestors. If Fran were Hawaiian, she would chant these people's names in her genealogy.²² And look how these photos

22. I refer here to the practice of Hawaiian Kanaka and other indigenous groups who often introduce themselves at the beginning of an oral presentation by reciting their genealogy. See, *Activist Genealogy*, *supra* note 8, at 197 ("Genealogy is relational. Identity is contingent, strategic, and always shifting. It weaves together physical, spiritual and social ties to place and people to land and sea... When we do the work of justice together, when we answer one another's call to join our several separate struggles, we learn justice from one another, and we learn that those struggles are

capture the same exchange of blessings as the photo of Fran, Mari, and John Calmore.

My sister Paula, the baby in these pictures, is an Episcopal priest. During the weeks following the murder of George Floyd she preached a sermon that begins with a story from Highlander:

There was always a lot of singing at Highlander. Zilphia Mae Johnson Horton, known as “The Singing Heart of Highlander,” had grown up receiving top honors in school in her hometown in Arkansas where her father operated a coal mine. Zilphia’s interest in the labor movement began to unfold when the Presbyterian minister in town attempted to organize her father’s workers for the Progressive Miner’s Union. After she refused to honor her father’s request to sever her connection with the church’s organizing movement, she was disowned and forced from her home because of what her father called ‘revolutionary Christian attitudes.

In 1946, just a few months after our family stayed at Highlander, Zilphia Horton was in Charleston, South Carolina when she heard a song being sung by members of the Food and Tobacco Workers who had walked out on the American Tobacco Company. The predominantly black and female union membership persisted in their strike, picketing for more than five months through periods of miserably cold and wet weather. To raise drooping spirits, they began to “sing themselves away” with the hymn “I’ll Be All Right Someday,” a song they had learned in their churches. Zilphia Horton carried the song back to the Highlander Folk School where she taught singer, Guy Carawan, who sang it for the first time at a civil rights demonstration in front of a group of protesters in Nashville in late 1959. By then, a second verse had been added as the anthem became the benediction of mass

one. We discover that we are related. We choose this family.” We hear a similar rhetorical practice in the Black church. See e.g., Church of the River, Church of the River Livestream, YouTube (April 9, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/live/CQ0Gk2MAvtQ?feature=share&t=3647> (Justin Pearson calling out the names of his parents and ancestors in his Easter Sunday sermon following his expulsion from the Tennessee legislature).

meetings and protests all over the south: "The truth shall make us free."

A third verse was added one grave night during a sheriff's raid on Highlander in July 1959. A crowd of mostly black and a few white people filled the hall for Sunday night worship – each person taking a turn preaching, testifying, praying, or raising a song. Toward the end of the meeting the crowd joined hands and lifted up "We Shall Overcome." Just then, a small army of local cops raided the place, brandishing their guns and billy clubs. "We are not afraid," the worshipers sang, spontaneously striking up a new verse.

By the early 1960's, "We Shall Overcome" was being sung all over the South, the country, and the world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa said, "When we sing 'We Shall Overcome,' [what we are protesting is] all that is dehumanizing, what we will overcome is [all that is unjust.]"²³

23. Paula Lawrence Wehmiller, *Speaking Truth to Love: A Theology of Protest* (June 28, 2020) (preaching at Trinity Church Swarthmore). As with any deep-rooted piece of folk culture and practice, the song and the story of We Shall Overcome at bottom have been built and communicated orally, and the many contributing strands are not always crystal clear or consistent with each other. Additional perspectives can be found in *We Shall Overcome: A Stirring Tribute to This International Civil Rights Anthem*, a documentary aired on PBS and narrated by Harry Belafonte. *We Shall Overcome: A Stirring Tribute to This International Civil Rights Anthem*, PBS (1990). The video includes an interview with Mary Ethyl Dozier, a young Black woman from Montgomery, barely in her teens, who was attending a voting-rights workshop at Highlander in 1959 when it was interrupted by the raid mentioned in the text above. It was Dozier who added in the dark that night a new verse, "We are not afraid." Of course, the song has continued to grow and change ever since. For audio resources, see *The History of We Shall Overcome*, All Things Considered, NPR (Jan. 15, 1999) <https://www.npr.org/1999/01/15/1031839/the-history-of-we-shall-overcome>; see also *The Inspiring Force of "We Shall Overcome"*, NPR (Aug. 28, 2013) <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/28/216482943/the-inspiring-force-of-we-shall-overcome>. Several books include relevant background. Kim Ruehl's "A Singing Army" has a whole chapter devoted to the song. KIM RUEHL, *A SINGING ARMY: ZYLPHIA HORTON AND THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL*, 147–59 (2021). Two other books include in their treatments the role it played in helping workshop attendees get through the 1959 raid on Highlander. See FRANK ADAMS, *UNEARTHING SEEDS OF FIRE: THE IDEA OF*

Paula's bible text that day was from Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers." And she reminded her congregation, as Justin Jones reminded his colleagues in the Tennessee legislature, that peace does not mean quiet, it means justice, that peacemakers are trouble makers for justice.

I cannot hear this story and not also hear the story that Fran and Jim tell of the UMWA Strike and occupation in 1989. 125 miners occupied and shut down the company's largest coal-processing plant, stopping production across the region. Thousands of union members, their families and neighbors come to support them and set up a camp in a field across from the occupied plant. Fran describes arriving at the encampment.

One of the most extraordinary sensations is looking into other people's eyes, young and old, black and white, men and women. As gazes meet, even between total strangers, there is irrepressible pride and a kind of harnessed elation. I have the impression that all of us are thinking, "This is one of the most important experiences of my life. I will remember this until I die."

....

Night is falling, and as we look across at the coal plant, we can see that the guys on the inside have come out on the roof again. This time they have their flashlights with them, and they look like a swarm of fireflies on the building opposite. A crowd has already gathered for the nightly ritual of chanting and singing back and forth between the bridge and the plant itself.

...

A group of Kentucky miners arrive, and they have their own contribution. They get on the bullhorn, introduce themselves, and say they have planned a song they want to sing to the men in the plant. One of their members, a gifted singer, lines out "Amazing Grace" in the old style, for all those on both sides to hear and join.

There is a resonant pause as we hear our own echoes fall away, and in a minute the musicians have laughed us into "Solidarity Forever." As we on our side join

HIGHLANDER 75-76, 131-33, 154 (1975); JOHN GLEN, HIGHLANDER: NO ORDINARY SCHOOL 1932-1962, 144-48 and 193-94 (1988).

*raised hands and sway to the rhythm of the grand old song, we look over at the plant roof and see that the lights of the men across the way are also held high and are swaying in time to the music. Tears fall free and unashamed down many faces around me.*²⁴

“Amazing Grace,” “Solidarity Forever,” “We Shall Overcome,”—songs sung across the dark spaces of slavery, labor exploitation, Jim Crow, and backlash. Songs announcing the solidarity of justice seekers, protesting all that is dehumanizing, overcoming all that is unjust.

Story Four: “This is What Democracy Looks Like”



Picture 4 - Nashville, TN, 2023

I have almost finished writing these remarks, when I receive an email from Fran titled “In Nashville Yesterday.”

Thought you might like to see this compilation video from the amazing and truly unprecedented crowd at Legislative Plaza in

24. Jim Sessions & Fran Ansley, *supra* note 12.

Nashville yesterday, trying to push the General Assembly on gun control.

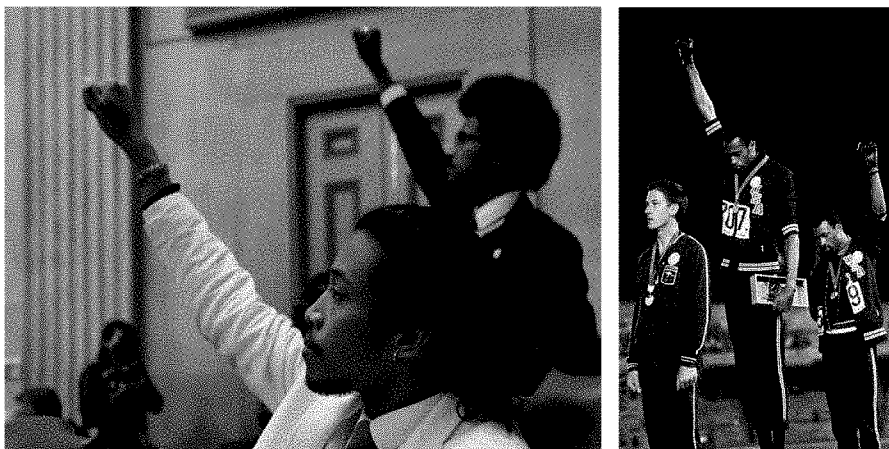
Indeed, the sight of this crowd was just what I needed for my backlash blues. Thousands of people, mostly young, but some of us old folks too, Black, white, brown, Asian, men and women, queer and trans, shouting our anguish and rage. “Our blood, your hands.”

The immediate goal of the protest is gun control. But these young people are putting the politicians on notice that we will not stand by while our children, our classmates, our teachers, or our parents die — from guns, from inadequate health care, from a lack of housing, living wage, or childcare.

A week earlier Fran had sent me a call to action from UT’s United Campus Workers. “An Injury to One is an Injury to All,” it read. “Support Fair Pay and Funding. Support Family Leave and Childcare. Support Healthcare Rights and Access. Oppose threats to Campus Safety. Oppose Attacks on Diversity and Truth in Education. Oppose attacks on Healthcare, LGBTQ People & Free Expression.”

“Whose house? Our house!” the crowd shouts. “No action, No peace!” “This is what democracy looks like.” We will not go to school each day in terror for our own lives. We will not be divided from our gay and trans friends by laws that deny them health care and their full humanity. You will not keep us from learning our country’s history of dehumanization and our history of resistance, the history that binds us to one another.

“This is what democracy looks like.”



Picture 5

I do not need to tell you the names of these two handsome young freedom fighters,²⁵ mirroring the iconic image from the 1968 Olympics that Fran's and my friend and mentor, Derrick Bell, chose for the frontispiece of his pathbreaking book, *Race Racism and American Law*.²⁶

I have shouted "Amen," and clapped, and cried tears of joy, as I listen to them speak truth to power with courage and eloquence, with poetry and scripture, sometimes even with dignified moments of silence. I am bursting with pride, to know that we have raised them up, that they are children of our movement. Great grandpa Job is bursting too. "My goodness," Fran would say.

Just look at them, carrying forward the intelligence, the trust, the blessings, and love exchanged in my first photo of Fran, Mari and John. Just look at them. Just look at all of us, beautiful comrades in Fran Ansley's Tennessee posse for justice and peace.

Somebody say, "AMEN!"

Somebody say, "AMEN!"

25. When I spoke these words in Knoxville, Tennessee on April 14, 2023, the entire audience recognized this picture and knew the story it told, but some context will be necessary for future readers. A few weeks prior to the symposium, six members of the Nashville community were killed in a school shooting. In response, a group of students, parents, and teachers rallied on the Tennessee House floor to demand gun control legislation. State Representatives Justin Jones, Justin Pearson, and Gloria Johnson, who became known as the "Tennessee Three," joined the protest. In response, the Republican members of the Tennessee House moved to expel the Tennessee Three from the state legislature for breaking decorum. On April 6, Jones and Pearson were expelled, while Johnson narrowly avoided expulsion by a single vote. Each of Jones and Pearson were eventually reinstated by the Metropolitan Nashville Council and the Shelby County Board of Commissioners, respectively. See Clyde McGrady & Emily Cochrane, *"The Justins" Follow a Legacy of Resistance in Tennessee*, N.Y. TIMES (April 14, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/14/us/justin-pearson-justin-jones-tennessee.html>.

26. DERRICK BELL, *RACE, RACISM AND AMERICAN LAW* (1973).

