

MUSIC OF A MOVEMENT'S WAKE:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOUTHERN FOLK CULTURAL REVIVAL PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Carol G. Prince: Music of a Movement's Wake:
The Evolution of the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project
(Under the direction of Jerma A. Jackson)

The following paper examines the evolution of the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project (SFCRP) between 1966 and 1976. Founded in 1965 by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Anne Romaine, the SFCRP brought together an interracial coalition of musicians to tour the South and emphasize the shared cultural heritage of blacks and whites in the region. This paper traces the organization's trajectory from its origins in the Civil Rights Movement to its shift to new and younger audiences in the form of public school projects and finally to the conflicts the organization grappled with in the mid-1970s. Specifically, tensions surfaced in the organization around cultural politics as the political organizing environment evolved. As the SFCRP adapted its programming to new audiences, African American musicians envisioned alternative pathways of cultural work outside interracial cultural exchange in the post-Jim Crow South.

To my grandmothers

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Even as the intellectual framing evolved, the spirit of this project always rested in the music and words of Bernice Johnson Reagon and Anne Romaine. I began this work because I hoped to better understand how Dr. Reagon made meaning out of her time as a songleader in the Movement. As I stumbled upon the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project and Anne Romaine Papers I began to gain a sense of the external political and cultural pressures that affected an evolving coalition between two women committed to shaping a world after Jim Crow. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to both Bernice Johnson Reagon and Anne Romaine for modeling the difficult work of coalition building and wrestling with the rich and messy questions that arise in the process of organizing work.

This piece of writing reflects the enduring support of my community near and far. The roots of this project extend to my senior year of college at the University of Puget Sound when Professor Grace Livingston introduced me to Dr. Reagon's music and scholarship. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Grace Livingston who has challenged me to maintain faith in the work and taught me to always stay grounded in the learning stance. Special thanks to my undergraduate advisor Nancy Bristow who first taught me what it means to think historically and whose mentorship has helped me navigate life inside and outside the classroom.

During my research, the staff at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina and the Ralph Rinzler Collections at the Smithsonian Institute guided me in accessing crucial sources during my summer in the archives. Former members of the Southern

Folk Cultural Revival Project who are still living: Brenda Jones, Sparky Rucker, and Justin Demps generously shared their memories and experiences. Special thanks to Alice Gerrard, who opened her home to grant me an oral history interview.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SFCRP	Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SSOC	Southern Student Organizing Committee

Far from her native Georgia, civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon stood in front of a crowd of women and declared, “I’ve never been this high before... I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die.”¹ Reagon had been invited to deliver the keynote address at the second annual West Coast Women’s Music Festival in Yosemite, California in 1981. During her remarks, she drew parallels between her altitude sickness and the equally disorienting effect of coalition work, arguing, “most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing.”² Notably, Bernice Johnson Reagon possesses a rare kind of rhetorical power and dexterity that has earned her, along with numerous other accolades in the field of African American music and culture, revered status as a scholar, performer, and orator. Yet her speech at the West Coast Women’s Music Festival exposed with particular salience both the promises and problems at the heart of coalition building.

Fifteen years before Reagon delivered her remarks, she received a phone call from a white southern activist named Anne Romaine. Romaine needed Reagon’s help; she wanted to assemble a tour of black and white southern musicians to raise money for the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), a coalition of white progressive activists on college campuses who were affiliated with the black-led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).³ In 1965, the same year the Voting Rights Act legally outlawed racial segregation, Romaine met

¹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 356. Reprint, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 356.

² Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 356.

³ Transcript, Anne Romaine, Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, Folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

SNCC organizer Bob Moses at Highlander Folk School during a joint meeting of the SSOC and SNCC. Recognizing that social segregation and most of the conventions of the Jim Crow South endured despite legal prohibition, Moses proposed the idea of an integrated folk tour of colleges and communities in the South “using music as a political, social, and cultural statement.”⁴ Moses and Romaine imagined that teaching audiences about the South’s diverse cultural heritage through music would help dismantle entrenched ideas about race that lingered in Jim Crow’s wake. Moses then encouraged Romaine to reach out to Bernice Reagon who had developed expansive networks of musicians across the South during her tours with African American Civil Rights movement performers.⁵ That fall, Reagon and Romaine met in Atlanta and by the following spring had organized the Southern Folk Festival.

Romaine and Reagon’s vision was unprecedented in its ethic and design. Admittedly, folk festivals were hardly a new phenomenon in the mid-sixties. The so-called postwar “folk revival” had swept college campuses and captured the zeitgeist of the early part of the decade. Participants in the revival, often white middle-class college students, sought to popularize “folk” or “roots” music. While this musical genre remained conceptually loose, it connoted an identification with and valorization of the working class and opposition to the perceived commercialized indulgences of pop music.⁶ However, while folk festivals were concentrated in

⁴ Correspondence, Folder 110 in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵ For Reagon’s first published account of music in the Civil Rights movement, see her dissertation: “Songs of the Civil Rights movement: 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History,” PhD diss., Howard University, 1975.

⁶ U.S. cultural historians have devoted considerable attention to the so-called post-war folksong revival. “Long histories” chronicle the efforts of a growing early twentieth-century folklore establishment and collectors who sought to develop an “American roots music” canon with leftist labor organizing music of the 1920s and 1930s. Many historians have since grappled with the notions of “revival” and “authenticity.” Benjamin Filene has challenged the idea that “folk” music existed completely outside the commercial realm. Instead, many scholars note that this “revival moment” both intersected with and distinguished itself from the commercial music industry and academia. “Folk revivals” often reinvented the very traditions and measures of authenticity they sought to revive. See Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American*

the North, Romaine and Reagon's tour was distinctly southern. As both Romaine and Reagon later reflected, the first tour was historic in its "attempt to present—within a political, social, and cultural context, southern and southern-based musicians to southern audiences."⁷ Furthermore, their effort contained a political purpose linked to the movement. Romaine and Reagon conceived of the Southern Folk Festival to mobilize southern audiences. The first interracial tour reached eleven southern colleges and universities (both historically white and black) through the support of Civil Rights organizations all over the South.⁸

The musical and historical context of Romaine and Reagon's coalition is crucial to understand. By the mid-sixties, the thrust of the folk revival had dissipated as folk and rock music increasingly merged, constricting the market for popular folk music.⁹ More importantly, 1965 marked the legal abolition of Jim Crow. Activists who had focused on dismantling segregation faced a new challenge of imagining the future of the movement. Violence and intimidation in the Deep South had hardly abated, a reality that tempered any sense of victory for grassroots organizers.¹⁰ SNCC responded by embracing racial separatism and expelling white

Roots Music (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Grace E. Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love With Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Neil Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁷ Correspondence, Folder 110 in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸ Project Brochure, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁹ Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition*, 9.

¹⁰ For more on SNCC and the evolution of grassroots organizing see Charles Payne: *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

members in 1966 to chart an organizing path of black political autonomy.¹¹ The SSOC shifted its focus to organizing with white progressives in the North around opposition to the Vietnam War.

This racially charged moment contextualizes the central dissonances of Romaine and Reagon's vision. Reagon and Romaine imagined a coalition based on interracial cultural exchange. Specifically, the project emphasized the "underlying cultural exchange that has existed in the South for several centuries."¹² Their vision contained a regional, racial, and class focus. The tours drew from musicians and audiences in the South, both black and white. Additionally, the tours focused on fostering mutual respect and understanding between black and white working class people and hired musicians from predominantly working class backgrounds.¹³ As Reagon noted later, "Our point was that white and black southern culture related and crossed each other."¹⁴ Overall, Romaine and Reagon imagined a new way to educate and mobilize audiences in the South across class and race by highlighting the historically porous cultural and musical boundaries in the South.

While their mission might seem straightforward and admirable on the surface, its historical and cultural implications are complex and reflect contradictory aims. The political strategy of the tours foregrounded interracial working-class solidarity while the political and racial climate from which the organization emerged moved toward racial separatism.

Furthermore, the folk tours materialized from a social movement aimed at abolishing Jim Crow,

¹¹ See Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). For a synthesis of current trends of Black Power scholarship, see Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 96 (December 2009).

¹² Southern Grassroots Music Tour Brochure, folder 129, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹³ Newspaper article, folder 115, in the Anne Romaine Papers 20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Smithsonian Folkways: Bernice Johnson Reagon in Conversation," October 22, 2003, <http://www.folkways.si.edu/bernice-johnson-reagon-civil-rights-song-leader/african-american-struggle-protest-folk/music/article/smithsonian>.

yet continually infused the idea of a shared southern past with a redemptive quality. This paradox raises a crucial question: is it possible to abolish the remnants of Jim Crow while valorizing the Southern past?

To explore this issue I examine the evolution of Romaine and Reagon's enduring coalition of black and white musicians. Their initial effort, first called the Southern Folk Festival and later renamed the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project (hereafter known as the SFCRP), emerged within a particularly fraught political moment and endured for over two decades. While the organization remains relatively obscure, an analysis of its evolution opens up larger questions about music, the cultural politics of interracial activism, and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁵ The first decade of the SFCRP provides a particularly resonant case study to explore some of the same promises and tensions within coalition building that Romaine and Reagon continued to wrestle with throughout their careers.

Despite its cultural and historical richness, the SFCRP has generally evaded scholarly attention. Its absence from historical literature is surprising given the robust scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement, the folk revival of the mid-twentieth century, and the politics of race in American popular music, all areas of historical inquiry this project encircles.¹⁶ The few scholars

¹⁵ The political legacy of the Civil Rights Movement has been supplemented and contested by historians since the first wave of scholarship in the late seventies. For syntheses and critiques of current scholarship, see Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Searching for a New Freedom" in *A Companion to African American History*, edited by Alton Hornsby (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005), 1234-63. Clayborne Carson published the first organizational history of SNCC in 1981 and argued that Black Power ideology contributed to SNCC's fragmentation. See Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the Nineteen-Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). A decade later, Charles Payne published the groundbreaking survey of SNCC's work in Mississippi and broke from the "top-down" organizational history framework. See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). SNCC histories have begun to foreground women's contributions and fused the grassroots and "top-down" approach such as Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Questions of race and authenticity have remained central to the historiography of American popular music. My analysis draws heavily from Karl Hagstrom Miller, who has argued that academic folklorists at the turn of the century racialized authenticity by creating a "sonic demarcation" between "white" and "black" musical sound. Miller notes that the race-based categories of music were a twentieth century phenomenon that bolstered Jim Crow rather than an accurate reflection

who have addressed the organization have either limited their scope to its origin story or deemed it unsuccessful due to an organizing climate moving away from interracial activism.¹⁷

Admittedly, Romaine's interracial stance caused problems. However, a historical interpretation that only focuses on the political costs of interracial organizing misses the nuances of cultural tension within the organization. Perhaps no other cultural form is more cited or debated than music, a critical medium of political, social, and cultural transformation. The emergence and evolution of the SFCRP offers a new way to consider how racial tensions speak to deeper tensions about culture or cultural politics. African American cultural politics, specifically, refers to the process in which cultural production became politicized and politics became embedded in cultural forms during the ongoing freedom struggle.¹⁸

To better understand and interpret the evolution of the SFCRP, I consulted scholarship that has centered culture in the study of social movements. While historians have typically emphasized the political change social movements fashioned, recent generations of sociologists have begun to explore their decisive cultural impact. Larry Isaac, for example, has suggested that social movements are "cultural production agents" that require a shared vision and identity.¹⁹ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison have argued that social movements offer new platforms for

of how southerners performed and accessed music in their daily lives. See Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), William Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), Lawrence Levine *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Joe Street focused on the Southern Folk Cultural Revival project as part of his broader argument about the role of culture in the Civil Rights Movement. He argued that after Reagan left the organization, Romaine began to focus expressly on white cultural revival due to the changing political climate that left black audiences less likely to embrace interracial tours. See, Joe Street, "Liberation Culture: African American Culture as a Political Weapon in the 1960s Civil Rights movement" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2003).

¹⁸ Waldo E. Martin, *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics and Postwar America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁹ Larry Isaac, "Movement of Movements: Culture Moves in the Long Civil Rights Struggle" *Social Forces* 87 (2008), 33.

cultural innovation and represent critical sites of tension between progress and tradition because movements generally mobilize against tradition in favor of a more progressive vision.²⁰ Notably, the SFCRP rests at the nexus of the convergent forces of the “folk revival” and the movement to end Jim Crow. The revival impulse relied on a conception of “roots” music that the SFCRP mobilized for “a selected or usable past” for the present political moment of ending segregation.²¹

Pulling this literature together, I argue that tensions over cultural politics jeopardized the organization’s vision of interracial cultural change as the political landscape evolved. In 1966, Romaine and Reagon linked the Southern Folk Festival to the movement and used culture to foster political change. However, as the audiences of the tours shifted in the late sixties and early seventies, the SFCRP’s cultural and political stance evolved away from the organization’s movement origins. By the mid-seventies, Romaine’s understanding of culture and cultural politics conflicted with that of many African American musicians on the tours. While the SFCRP originally used music to loosen the rigid social boundaries of Jim Crow, a changing political climate transformed the purpose and cultural meaning of interracial cultural exchange. While Romaine and Reagon both retained a commitment to a progressive agenda, they came to use culture differently as an educational and political tool in the wake of the movement. Tracing the evolution of the SFCRP, an organization reflective of initial collaboration and interracial coalition building, offers a new way to understand Romaine and Reagon’s separate trajectories.

²⁰ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

²¹ Eyerman and Jamison, 29. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger coined the term “invented tradition” and argued that nations mobilize new “traditions” at politically opportune moments while citing these traditions’ timelessness as a source of legitimacy. See: Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Charles Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and *Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South: Essays and Commentaries by Charles Joyner*, edited by Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), Bill C. Malone *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), and James Cobb *Redefining Southern Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

Furthermore, the organization provides a case study that offers one way of untangling the contested notions of southern tradition, cultural politics, and interracial organizing in a post-Jim Crow South.

Bernice Johnson Reagon and Anne Romaine share remarkable similarities. They were born the same year, came of age during the final decades of Jim Crow, and joined the Civil Rights Movement as young adults. As artists and performers, they both grounded their music in social activism, as evidenced by their work on the SFCRP. Each developed a career in the commercial realm during the early seventies. Whereas Reagon formed Sweet Honey in the Rock, an a cappella group rooted in African American history and culture, Romaine pursued a brief solo career in country music. Both women were also trained historians who lived most of their professional lives outside the academy. They each met their husbands in the movement and then divorced them, choosing instead to live as single mothers with full careers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Romaine and Reagon carved out a space in the movement as cultural workers. In this capacity both women set out to turn music into a political medium that they could use to educate as well as strengthen community.²² Arming their music with a cultural and political mission, Romaine and Reagon inevitably carved out an equally essential space outside the more masculinized “hard politics” of the movement. The two were educators, artists, and connectors who honed their organizing skills by using music as a bridging tool.

Social differences between Reagon and Romaine were equally telling and significant. Race and class influenced how each experienced the movement and enlisted music to educate

²² For more on education and cultural work, see Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings; Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992) and Paulo Freire: *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

and foster community. Bernice Johnson Reagon, who grew up black and working class in Jim Crow Georgia, encountered the movement as a high school student. Alternatively, Romaine, white and middle-class, did not engage with the movement until she enrolled in graduate school. Furthermore, the nuances of their views on music and culture offer equally important dissonances to consider. Their respective upbringings and experiences in the movement, rather than immutable categories of identity, influenced how Romaine and Reagon each understood culture and each other in ways that would ultimately hinder their coalition.

Bernice Johnson Reagon had long found her voice (both figuratively and literally) as a cultural force in the movement by the time Anne Romaine called to ask for her help in 1965. Born in 1942, Reagon came of age in Dougherty County Georgia, seven miles outside of Albany.²³ As the daughter of a preacher, she grew up in the congregational singing tradition of the black church, which shaped Reagon's ideas about music and culture in her formative years. In her own workshops, Reagon has described the congregational singing tradition as a democratic, interactive musical style with a standard repertoire of spirituals passed down orally through generations. She stated once, "I felt like there was no air I breathed that these songs didn't exist in. I didn't even think of them as songs I needed to learn. They just came with the territory."²⁴ This type of singing is characterized by the act of "taking a song out of the air" in which an audience "takes" a song from a choir or performer and shares the music in the space, which marked a departure from the strict boundaries between performer and audience that prevailed in Euro-American Christian tradition. This democratic and interactive structure molded Reagon's understanding of music and performance from an early age.

²³ Bernice Johnson Reagon, "'Let Your Light Shine': Historical Notes," in *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey in the Rock, Still on the Journey*, ed. Bernice Johnson Reagon (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 13.

²⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon in "The Songs are Free: Bernice Johnson Reagon and African American Music," prod. and ed. Bill Moyers and Gail Pellett, Public Affairs Television, 1991.

As Reagon grew older and ventured beyond the community in which she was raised, her musical education expanded. In 1955, she began high school at age twelve and tried out for the glee club, as she wryly noted, “so I would be able to wear stockings.”²⁵ In her high school choir Reagon learned songs from the European vocal concert tradition. Here, she encountered an unfamiliar canon but recalled, “I *learned* to really like this style of singing and this repertoire of songs. It was an integral part of the educational culture created in the black community and an indicator of an African American strategy of advancing with the larger society by becoming fluent in the ways of that culture.”²⁶ Notably, Reagon commented that cultural exchange between black and white musical styles was often an asymmetrical political and cultural strategy, a note she would return to later when she vocalized concerns about interracial coalition building.

During high school, Reagon also cultivated her identity as an activist. She developed a political consciousness during the major landmark historical events of the Civil Rights Movement such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the murder of Emmett Till, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In 1959, Reagon became the field secretary of the first NAACP Albany, Georgia youth branch during her last year of high school. A year later, she enrolled at Albany State College, encountered SNCC during the Albany movement’s effort to register voters, and met Cordell Reagon, a seventeen-year-old SNCC activist whom she later married. When Albany State College suspended her for her involvement with SNCC, Reagon committed herself to the movement.

Reagon’s time in the movement, particularly the danger she faced in jail, shaped her as an academic, a musician, and an activist. In jail Reagon began to make connections between sound, community, and body that she has honed over the course of her career. She has repeatedly

²⁵ Reagon, “Singing for My Life,” in *We Who Believe in Freedom*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

described her time in jails as a kind of conversion experience. In later interviews she reflected on her time there, noting, “My voice! It was bigger! It had grown! It was as if my living through the jail experience had also been a voice lesson. You can actually feel and hear the changes in your instrument and the way in which you handle a song as you sing your life.”²⁷ Strong singers in jail, Reagon asserted, were crucial to holding the group together both politically and spiritually. Songs became an intangible weapon in the movement because, as Reagon affirmed, “When you sing people walk into the sound of your singing before they can get to your body.”²⁸ In a separate interview, Reagon explained that song held a community together in jail and in mass meetings and “held a cementing and affirming role, giving us a way to really express the celebration and the power that we felt about what we were doing.”²⁹ Reagon’s time as a song leader taught her how to use music to unite a community of people from disparate backgrounds who had shared a common experience in jail. For Reagon, music and sound carried not only a cultural but also a spiritual weight that affirmed people’s commitment to risk their lives in the movement.

Reagon later enrolled at Spelman College on a full scholarship, but again abandoned the academy. Instead, she joined the SNCC Freedom Singers, a quintet of song leaders that embarked on a series of national tours to report on the activities of the movement during the media blackout on the violence in the Deep South. Reagon eventually returned to Spelman, finished her degree, and moved to Washington D.C. to pursue her doctorate in African American history at Howard University. The relationships Reagon formed with activists and musicians

²⁷ Reagon, “Singing for My Life,” in *We Who Believe in Freedom* 157.

²⁸ Bernice Reagon, interview by Cathy Ennis, Smithsonian Folkways Collection.

²⁹ Sound Recording, Bernice Johnson Reagon Oral History Interview, by Therese Spaude, UC 1303 A/1 UC Box 228, January 27, 1982, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

across the nation during her time in the Movement, however, proved particularly important in her coalition with Anne Romaine.³⁰

Anne Romaine's path to both music and the movement differed considerably from Reagon's. Born Dorothy Anne Cooke in 1942, Anne grew up in Gastonia, North Carolina. Romaine's paternal grandfather was a mill worker and she maintained an interest in cotton mill workers and the fate of the working class throughout her adult life even as her own family enjoyed a measure of upward mobility.³¹ Armed with a formal education, her father abandoned mill work for a career as a lawyer and later a state senator. His success makes clear that Romaine was raised in the new postwar middle class, an environment folklorist Robert Cantwell described as "perplexingly divided by the intermingling of an emerging mass society and a decaying industrial culture."³² Romaine's upbringing mirrored many other middle-class families' whose principal wage earners were fathers who entered the postwar American corporate world.

In spite of her middle-class ties, Romaine, like other baby boomers, gradually began to question the comforts of her own upbringing. After graduating from an all-white high school, she travelled to Mexico as a missionary, an experience she described as "transformative" in opening her eyes to inequality.³³ She returned to the United States to finish her undergraduate education at Queens College in Charlotte and subsequently enrolled in a graduate program in History at the University of Virginia. Early on during her time as a graduate student, Anne met Howard Romaine, a white southerner deeply embedded in the radical student movement and the New

³⁰ Natalie Hopkinson, "Rock Solid," *The Crisis*, September/October 2003, 31.

³¹ Finding Aid Summary, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³² Robert Cantwell, "When We Were Good: Class and Culture in the Folk Revival," in Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition*, 45.

³³ Transcript, Anne Romaine, Oral History Interview, March 19 1993, by Greg Michel, p. 8, Folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Left whom she later married in 1965.³⁴ It was at the University of Virginia where both Anne and Howard Romaine became involved in the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC).

Organizing against inequality and injustice, the SSOC supplied an outlet for young white southern activists to gain social and political access to each other.³⁵ The SSOC materialized after white students began forming civil rights groups on southern campuses to support the sit-in movements of the early sixties. Although it maintained deep ties with SNCC in its early days, the SSOC remained a white progressive organization composed of students who struggled to find their place in a black-led movement. As a result, the SSOC struggled with class and racial solidarity. In the summer of 1964, the group tried to bridge class divides by reaching out to local, mostly working class, white people in Mississippi.³⁶ This effort, known as “The White Folks Project,” sent white college students into one of the major strongholds of white supremacy in order to have on-the-ground conversations about the Civil Rights Movement with “white folks.” However, the SSOC failed to mobilize white Mississippians. This defeat caused fissures in the SSOC; members debated whether the best use of the organization’s resources would be organizing more progressive-leaning white students or returning to the white rural south which many activists in the SSOC deemed irredeemable.

As the SSOC struggled with its relationship to both the black-led movement and working-class whites in the South, it turned to culture and music as an organizing tool. The Civil Rights Movement exposed many white audiences and organizers, including Romaine, to African

³⁴ Finding Aid Summary, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁵ For the organizational history of the Southern Student Organizing Committee, see Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

³⁶ The SSOC launched its 1964 effort during SNCC’s Freedom Summer initiative to organize African Americans in Mississippi.

American spirituals and freedom songs for the first time.³⁷ Later reflecting about her time in the movement, Romaine pointed out that the music, although riveting and powerful, prompted penetrating questions about her own privilege. “We, of course, were largely middle class,” she explained in a tone of unwitting defensiveness. Romaine continued, “So we didn’t know what our own culture was even before the black movement. So here we were out here floundering around, witnessing the mighty power of this black culture with all its dimensions and wondering who in the hell we were.”³⁸ Here, Romaine conveyed the cultural impact of organizing work that provoked an awareness and concern that her race and class status lacked cultural salience.

As the above quote indicates, participation in the Civil Rights Movement forced many in the SSOC to reckon with their white identity for the first time. As actors involved in a political struggle for racial equality, many whites in the SSOC grappled with a sense of remorse and shame. They understood their upbringings were bolstered with class and racial privilege but felt ambivalent about abandoning these advantages. However, whites in the SSOC also struggled with a sense of cultural poverty. James Cobb has used the language of “cultural naked-ness” to describe a phenomenon of southern whites attempting to find cultural value in whiteness divorced from white supremacy.³⁹

Romaine, searching for a redemptive cultural identity, reached into her past lineage. In a 1981 letter to her father, she reflected, “I have taken a different road than you would have wanted. But I don’t think you ever realized how much those early years ...and the time I spent with Granddaddy and Grandmother...influenced my thinking and my feelings. I strongly identify

³⁷ Eyerman and Jamison, 132.

³⁸ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁹ Charles C. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind & Identity in the South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 141.

with that part of my life and it's hard to explain how it came about or why. But my feeling is that it's not necessary to explain or figure it out. I respect those people and the tradition and culture that they come from and that you and grandmother and mother come from."⁴⁰ While she might not have consciously realized it, Romaine found solace in her family's working class "tradition and culture" amidst her experience of shame. To cover her own "nakedness," to borrow Cobb's language, Anne Romaine sought a path to redemption for southern whites by connecting people across class and racial lines through music.

Romaine enlisted music as a vehicle to construct a usable past capable of solving some of the tensions that rattled the SSOC. She learned guitar and embarked on her own "quest for cultural roots" to locate a tradition that could galvanize southern whites.⁴¹ Romaine's search mirrored the impulses of many other white middle-class students in the folk revival who sought an "authentic" cultural heritage. Her use of tradition, then, reflected what folklorist Burt Feintuch has argued is "an ongoing process of interpreting and reinterpreting the past."⁴² Specifically, Romaine located a usable past in the country and bluegrass tradition, which the SSOC viewed as powerful because of its roots in "the history, culture, and condition of southern whites."⁴³ Bluegrass and country, despite segregated marketing strategies in the twentieth century, were hardly exclusively "white" musical traditions.⁴⁴ Yet, Romaine identified a tradition of working-

⁴⁰ Letter from Anne Romaine, folder 14, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴¹ Neil V. Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xiii.

⁴² Burt Feintuch, "Musical Revival as Musical Transformation," in Rosenberg, 92.

⁴³ Michel, 115.

⁴⁴ Karl Miller argues that the folklore establishment and the commercial music industry reified "separate folk cultures" by separating race records from old time music in the early twentieth century. The industry effectively erased a long tradition of African Americans and whites in the South playing a variety of kinds of music. See Miller *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

class “white culture” and placed herself inside of it. After all, bluegrass and country connoted something more positive than racism, the most enduring white tradition in the South.

While the SSOC struggled to define its relationship to working-class whites reluctant to embrace racial equality, Romaine found music and culture as a uniting force. Romaine hoped to resolve her ambivalence about her own identity and the SSOC’s conflict over its vision. Capitalizing on the already salient cultural moment of folk revival and marrying it to a commitment to the movement, Romaine imagined that the tours would “confront white students with the social issues of the day.”⁴⁵ Through integrated folk tours that featured both songs of the movement and folk songs from an earlier era, Romaine aimed to highlight the porous musical and cultural boundaries that had existed between black and white southerners.

Despite their differences, Reagon and Romaine found common ground in the early years of their coalition. Romaine recalled their strong connection when they met in the mid-sixties. She pointed out that their friendship developed quickly around “this electrifying idea of organizing a tour of southern-based community-based singers who used their music mainly for justice issues, or themselves came from obvious struggle situations...and their music was part of you know, telling the story of the South, telling the story of conflict, and how it can be addressed in current times.”⁴⁶ In their efforts to put music in service of a progressive vision, both women managed to carve out a leadership space by using music to bridge divides.

Still Reagon and Romaine understood and mobilized culture and tradition differently. Romaine’s leadership of the SSOC provided a platform for her to think more broadly about the potential of music and culture as a tool for political engagement. There, she honed her

⁴⁵ Michel, 117.

⁴⁶ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

understanding of a “white culture” of hardship as a path to redemption for southern whites. Reagon, on the other hand, applied her background in the African American sacred song tradition to the political reality of the movement. Their distinct visions aligned into a common cause during the early days of the tour. Gradually their divergences began to surface more prominently as both the political landscape and the organization evolved.

In 1966, Romaine and Reagon transformed the Southern Folk Festival from an idea into a reality. The early tours of the Southern Folk Festival reflected Romaine and Reagon’s disparate yet convergent understandings of music and cultural work that connected their desire to adapt musical traditions to help end segregation. While the Southern Folk Festival emerged in the waning years of the folk revival movement, the early folk tours contained an explicit philosophy and connection to the movement in both practice and vision. Activists in the SSOC celebrated this music as part of their “search for a radical southern past” while Reagon, who reached out to African American musicians she met as a member of the SNCC Freedom Singers, envisioned an interracial cultural commitment on stage.⁴⁷

Romaine’s vision of southern distinctiveness, which she developed as a member and leader of the SSOC, proved to be an effective early strategy. That vision comes through in early brochures about the tours, which she wrote. One brochure intimated that the source of southern distinctiveness resided in musical practices that transcended racial boundaries. “We believe that the South possesses valuable traditions, in both black and white culture, which will enable

⁴⁷ Michel, 115.

Southerners to make a unique contribution to America,” Romaine pointed out.⁴⁸ She even hoped that the folk festival would compel students to “create a revival of folk culture” as an organizing tactic.⁴⁹ Founded in opposition to Northern “topical song” performers present in the revivals such as the Newport Folk Festival, the tour emphasized a distinct “southern-ness.” A press release dated from the early tours highlighted that distinctiveness: “The performers want to focus attention on the various forms of musical expressions which have made the South the greatest source of folk music in America.”⁵⁰

However, the folk tours carefully managed their political message. For example, the early involvement of Pete Seeger, a well-known political folk singer from New York and a friend of Bernice Reagon’s, caused controversy in the SSOC. In a letter to Romaine, folklorist and white movement participant Charles Joyner suggested that the Southern Folk Festival de-emphasize “protest” songs common in the Northern folk festivals and instead foreground the “protest implicit in many of the old Southern folk songs which we have taken for granted.”⁵¹ This change in emphasis, Joyner argued, would be “very rewarding in terms of reaching young Southerners of both races with the meaning of their folk heritage.”⁵² Here, the use of “southern grassroots tradition” subtly linked a cultural mission with a political mission to end segregation.

⁴⁸ SSOC Brochure, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁹ Letter from Anne Romaine to Conrad Browne and Guy Carawan, October 10, 1966, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁰ Folk Festival Press Release, folder 285, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵¹ Letter from Charles Joyner to Anne Romaine, November 4, 1966, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵² Letter from Charles Joyner to Anne Romaine, November 4, 1966, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The early tours were organized and sponsored by colleges, communities, and civil rights organizations all over the South and reached eleven southern states. The first show in Richmond Virginia drew large crowds and featured six artists: Hedy West, Reverend Pearly Brown, Gil Turner, Eleanor Walden, Mable Hillary, and Bernice Johnson Reagon.⁵³ Anne Romaine reflected later, “It was so easy to book this tour, even in the South. And at that time, the student government boards involved faculty as well as students, and the faculty would say, look, you really oughta have this thing, you don’t know anything about this kind of music, but it’ll change your life. And the kids would love it.”⁵⁴ As Romaine envisioned it, witnessing black and white musicians performing on the same stage and learning about the existence of cultural exchange would challenge how students understood racial boundaries.

The sheer risk of Romaine and Reagon’s endeavor is important to note. During the first folk tours in the middle of the sixties, musicians assumed similar risks to grassroots activists. While travelling on the tours, black and white musicians shared cars and motels, ate at the same restaurants, and risked violent retaliation. Reagon later reflected, “It was really really scary getting to the halls because you had to travel through towns.”⁵⁵ This act, according to Reagon, was overtly political. She remembered: “We were coming out of the Civil Rights movement. We could put white musicians and black musicians on stages in the South. But we could get them on the stage and there was a statement we could make about the culture and the sharing in the culture that might be helpful as the South tried to contend with where we were going with the

⁵³ SFCRP tour materials, folder 278, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁴ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵ Video Recording, Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Smithsonian Folkways: Bernice Johnson Reagon in Conversation,” October 22 2003. <http://www.folkways.si.edu/bernice-johnson-reagon-civil-rights-song-leader/african-american-struggle-protest-folk/music/article/smithsonian>.

Civil Rights movement issues.”⁵⁶ For Reagon, the act of putting black and white musicians on stage together constituted an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement.

Even musicians who had not been active in the movement noted the political salience of the tours. Alice Gerrard, a “traditional” bluegrass singer with no formal political organizing experience described the levels of tension on the politically oriented tours:

These tours were very intense. I mean, you were crammed into these small vans, you know, driving for hours, playing at little communities and colleges and stuff like this in the South, and you just spent two weeks together, you know. There wasn’t a lot of money, so people shared motel rooms ...Because there was a lot of pressure on people, and not only was there the stress of just driving and playing and driving and playing, but there was also the stress of being an integrated tour in situations where you had to put your money where your mouth was a lot of times.... I mean, and you felt it a lot more, you were much more aware of things because the black artists were aware of it in ways that we had never even thought of.⁵⁷

Here, Gerrard noted that not only did the very act of black and white musicians sharing a stage represent a political stance, but musicians also risked their lives to be involved in the tours.

However, the political burden was not shared equally among black and white musicians. Gerrard later recalled a moment when she and Romaine ventured into a bar to get something to eat. When Johnny Shines, a black blues musician, joined them, the owner of the restaurant refused to let him eat inside. As Gerrard recalled, Anne Romaine stood up, started shaking her finger in the man’s face and said “You son of a bitch, that’s against the law and I’ll have the FBI on your ass so fast you won’t know.”⁵⁸ The owner, nonplussed, reached for a broom to defend himself against the slight blond woman screaming in his face. Yet notwithstanding Romaine’s

⁵⁶ Video Recording, Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Smithsonian Folkways: Bernice Johnson Reagon in Conversation,” October 22 2003. <http://www.folkways.si.edu/bernice-johnson-reagon-civil-rights-song-leader/african-american-struggle-protest-folk/music/article/smithsonian>.

⁵⁷ Transcript, Alice Gerrard Oral History Interview, October 14 1996, by Lisa J. Yarger, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁸ Transcript, Alice Gerrard Oral History Interview, March 2 2007, by Mary Johnson, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

interventions, African American musicians shouldered more of the risk on integrated folk tours, a burden that foreshadowed tensions that surfaced later in the organization.

Still, many musicians on the tours resisted overt political participation. As Romaine recalled later, some of the musicians even held “standard positions on racism” among whites in the South, meaning that they embraced white supremacy. She later noted, “I mean these weren’t folk singers. These were coal miners and people out of communities. There were some, but mostly the people on our tour were black and white working class kinds of people.”⁵⁹ Romaine draws a telling distinction between self-proclaimed “folk singers” of the largely middle class left, who supposedly espoused progressive racial politics and the working-class musicians whose musical traditions Romaine valorized, yet whose stances on racism she sought to change. However, Romaine was adamant that the tours remain interracial. As she noted early on, “with separate troupes it is impossible to present a good picture of the South in struggle for three centuries and how the two cultures influenced each other and to musically show what led up to what’s happening today.”⁶⁰ Here, the existence of cultural exchange contains an explicit link to current political circumstances.

More abstractly, Romaine and the SSOC linked the tradition of cultural exchange to the political environment of the South through the idea of “struggle.”⁶¹ The SSOC considered Southern music exceptional because it grew out of a history of struggle and deprivation and a tradition of regional hardship. The SSOC brochure released the first year of the Southern Folk

⁵⁹ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶⁰ Letter from Anne Romaine to Conrad Browne and Guy Carawan, October 10, 1966, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection #20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶¹ Bill Malone has argued that the region’s music is exceptional because it reflected a society defined by poverty, slavery, suffering, deprivation, and cultural isolation. See Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 3.

Festival marketed the folk tours as ways in which “the medium of music, the troupe, made up largely of southern folk musicians, is able to relate the richness of cultural heritage of black and white southerners.”⁶² Both leaders of the SSOC and musicians inherited these cultural categories and linked them to political struggle. For example, Alice Gerrard described that it was “a political point of view to kind of present the struggles of southern people through the lives and examples of music of the artists who were on the tour.”⁶³ Romaine sought to present the vision of a “culture of struggle” of musicians on the tour. Gerrard also noted that the whole point of being an artist on the tour was “to be able to somehow express your, not only your art, but the fact that it came from somewhere and that you as a person or as a woman or as an African American or as a Cajun musician had certain struggles that shaped who you were and your music.”⁶⁴

The early days of the Southern Folk Festival armed cultural exchange with an explicit political purpose. Yet soon after the first tour concluded, the political landscape began to change. By 1966 the revival impulse was still popular, but as the escalation in Vietnam lifted draft deferments for the primary audiences of the folk festivals, the idealism of the folk revival no longer proved adequate.⁶⁵ Similarly, as the SSOC and SNCC succumbed to internal conflict, Reagon and Romaine wondered if their coalition could survive without the financial support of fracturing student organizations. While support for the Southern Folk Festival diminished on college campuses, many southern artists who had toured early on were eager to reach audiences outside of universities. Romaine, perhaps haunted by the SSOC’s failed 1964 White Folks

⁶² SSOC Brochure, folder 275, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶³ Transcript, Alice Gerrard Oral History Interview, October 14 1996, by Lisa J. Yarger, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶⁴ Transcript, Alice Gerrard Oral History Interview, March 2 2007, by Mary Johnson, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶⁵ Bruce Jackson, “The Folksong Revival,” in Neil Rosenberg, ed. *Transforming Tradition*.

Project, hoped to use music to relate to audiences who may have been less receptive to the movement's goals. Gerrard agreed. In a 1969 letter to Romaine she noted:

To me it is much more rewarding to play communities than colleges, I do feel that the tour could be a force- tour de force- in the South on the grass roots community level much more so than on the college level. If it is necessary to retain college business and I don't say it's a bad idea- just if I had money I'd choose communities.⁶⁶

Gerrard and Romaine's hopes anticipated the direction of the Southern Folk Festival during the late sixties. Romaine embraced new projects outside the university circuit that pushed the boundaries of her and Reagon's original mission. While early on Romaine and Reagon drew from an interracial grassroots musical tradition to fuse education and performance on southern college campuses, they now needed to locate an alternative audience. However, as audiences for the tours evolved, questions about whom, exactly, encompassed this "grassroots tradition" materialized with new importance.

In 1967, the Southern Folk Festival evolved from its early roots as an outgrowth of the SSOC and Civil Rights Movement into an independent organization. Romaine and Reagon filed for tax exemption, attained nonprofit status, and changed the organization's name from the Southern Folk Festival to the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project (SFCRP). Their decision signified an important shift in funding and audiences; the primary source of income for the SFCRP changed from university touring revenue to grants and transformed their audience base from mainly college students often with connections to the movement to broad-based communities where connections to the movement were much more uneven. New federal agencies founded in 1965

⁶⁶ Letter from Alice Gerrard to Anne Romaine, November 10 1969, folder 39, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

such as the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities along with state and local arts councils were the primary funders of the SFCRP. This new expansion of audience base coupled with the new constrictions of grants allowed the SFCRP to grow their mission with significant qualifications.

In 1968, the SFCRP launched the Georgia Public School Project Series in Atlanta. The project placed musicians from the tours in short workshops about music, history, and culture in middle and high school classrooms. The programs endured from 1968 until 1974 and encompassed both a cultural and pedagogical shift in the organization's mission and audiences. These projects provide a rich case study to examine how the organization adapted its focus and strategies to reach younger audiences during a period of political and racial turmoil. Violence and rioting in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King rattled the nation and major urban centers like Atlanta. Indeed, Atlanta was a particularly fraught location to test out pedagogy of interracial cultural exchange because the city was just beginning to desegregate its schools.⁶⁷ New audiences and desegregation challenged the SFCRP to articulate the relevance of its political vision in a post-Jim Crow South. Additionally, new federal agencies founded in 1965 such as the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities along with state and local arts councils became the primary funders of the SFCRP instead of revenue from touring. Grant-funding changed the nature of how the SFCRP vocalized its mission to potential funders from the folklore establishment. Most of all, younger audiences forced the SFCRP to articulate its relevance for southern youth who had not participated in the movement.

⁶⁷ The schools in the program included: Peoples Street Elementary (about sixty percent white), Bass High School (about fifty percent black, however, black students only comprised about a third of the history class), and Roosevelt High School, (predominantly white and "only recently integrated by a few blacks"). Source: Public School Project Evaluation, Folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In response, the SFCRP deemphasized its connection to the movement yet maintained its insistence on linking their programming to southern tradition. This choice introduced new tensions around race and culture into the organization. During its early days on the university circuit, the Southern Folk Festival's vision of bringing black and white musicians and audiences together was a radical act. Desegregation, however, made such an act normative. Furthermore, while the organization had once sought to highlight protest and shared struggle in order to dismantle Jim Crow, the SFCRP's newer programs began reinforcing music as a way to teach history of two distinct cultures.

Unlike programming for university students, Romaine framed the new school projects around innovative strategies for teaching southern history and fostering community in newly desegregated schools.⁶⁸ The first program, "Music and History: Grassroots Music of the South" included seven participating musicians. In the project description Romaine wrote, "We want to educate southern students about the value of their own roots traditions which many have discarded or are ashamed of."⁶⁹ While this impulse echoes some of Romaine's earlier work in the SSOC mobilizing white students through music and culture, the new approach in the public school series lacked the explicit racial justice component. Instead, Romaine mobilized language of "tradition" and "roots" in publicity materials for the purposes of cultivating a sense of cultural identity in children during desegregation.

Romaine also encountered the political consequences of infusing black and white culture with an equally redemptive quality in a new context. Almost immediately after launching the programs, Romaine encountered heightened racial conflict around programming choices.

⁶⁸ Public School Project Evaluation, Folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶⁹ Public School Project Brochure, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Specifically, the SFCRP's emphasis on the trials of the white working class caused understandable tension. Romaine observed that the racial climate in Atlanta's schools made it difficult and "inadequate to simply present, as we have been doing, the best side of the white workingman."⁷⁰ Her early vision to invoke a redemptive vision for whites now conflicted with racism African American students experienced under desegregation. As Romaine presciently noted, when "such a contradictory presentation of the role of the white man in a newly integrated city school necessarily opens up the Black performer to all the barely repressed hostilities of the audience."⁷¹ The early lessons that placed the plight of all working-class southerners side-by-side erased the extent of white participation in black oppression. It is "not enough to have the white singers imply racism, while singing of the good deeds and similarities of poor Blacks and whites, when much of the white audiences are racist," Romaine observed.⁷² The project's original political aims fared differently in a newly integrated city school where racial and cultural tensions collided.

As a result, the programs enjoyed some qualified success yet illuminated major political and racial fissures. During the first year, the SFCRP organized two-hour sessions for ten days during English and Social Studies classes with eighth through tenth graders. One of the teachers, according to the *Atlanta Journal*, said "the program was so successful he plans to use a similar activity each year for history students."⁷³ Student letters also offered positive reception. One

⁷⁰ Public School Project Proposal, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷¹ Public School Project Proposal, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷² Public School Project Proposal, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷³ Newspaper Article: Ginger Hames, "Singers Teach History," *The Atlanta Journal*, Tuesday, June 4, 1968, 8-B, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

student noted that they “learned more about our country, our peoples emotions, prejudices and feelings...in a history class you don’t learn the feelings of the people.”⁷⁴ Some letters were more striking. In 1968 a student wrote, “I’ve always learned the slaves wanted to stay with the master because he was good but now I see it completely different. I didn’t know that some slaves couldn’t keep their own kids.”⁷⁵ Even as these letters attested to the transformative impact of the SFCRP’s programming, they also capture the chasm separating white and black students sharing a classroom. This particular letter illuminates internalized racist thinking that desegregation brought into sharp relief. Furthermore, despite some positive reception, the public school projects treaded on precarious ground. Teachers and superintendents generally welcomed the programming as long as it was uncontroversial and promoted racial harmony. Anne Romaine reflected later that the organization lost some grant support early on “because the school system felt that the material was too controversial.”⁷⁶

Additionally, while the SFCRP emphasized cultural exchange, the musical divisions in the programing reinforced race-based musical categories from Jim Crow. Instead of emphasizing how different musical forms in the South had influenced one another as they did in their early days with the student movement, the SFCRP presented the workshops separately in isolated lessons. For example, Reagon and Romaine offered a series of concerts and workshops at Roosevelt High School organized around three musical categories: “Mountain Life and Song,”

⁷⁴ “Music and History” Brochure, folder 183, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷⁵ Letter from Mike DuPree, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁷⁶ Anne Romaine interview, *The Tennessean*, folder 115, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“Black History Through Music,” and “Music of the Grassroots South.”⁷⁷ The distinctions between the sessions divided performers along racial lines in a way that had more in common with the commercial industry’s racialized musical categories from the early twentieth century than the SFCRP’s original movement impulse.⁷⁸ In a letter to a school principal in 1969, Anne Romaine noted that the “Mountain Life and Song” program was designated “for predominantly white inner city schools,” whereas “Black History Through Music is a program that Bernice conducts in all black schools.”⁷⁹ The public school programs indicated a key shift when the SFCRP’s programming did not allow for an expansive understanding of exchange or diffusion between black and white cultures. Instead, the project description’s mission statement noted that the “chief purpose of the [SFCRP] is to renew an interest in grassroots music and musicians throughout the South.”⁸⁰ The statement signaled a critical shift in the mission of the SFCRP. Having once used music as a cultural means of serving the movement, the organization altered its vision and reified the cultural legacy of Jim Crow.

As a result, the new framing of the project narrowed its political possibilities. Johnny Shines, who had been with the organization since the early tours, fully recognized the thorny challenges posed by the changing political climate. He noticed that some schools would be hard to approach with race-based framing. As Shines explained, “once you make the slip, you say

⁷⁷ Programs were funded by Title III of the Supplementary Education Act, Georgia Council for the Arts, the Newport Folk Foundation, Highlander Research Center, Equal Opportunity Atlanta, and the Atlanta Public School System. (Financial Report, Georgia Public School Projects, SFCRP Collection, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

⁷⁸ See Miller, 119. He argued that the National Folklore Society and academic folklorists demanded “folk culture” conform to an image that did not necessarily reflect the everyday lives of musicians. The grants that the SFCRP applied for, funded by folklorists, inherited these race-based categories of “folk culture.”

⁷⁹ Letter from Anne Romaine to Mr. Hill Bermont, folder 183, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸⁰ Public School Project Description, folder 183, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

black, you just locked the door. If you make the slip and say white, you just locked the other door... because the first thing that comes into their mind, that this is a political thing- it's downright political."⁸¹ Musicians who stepped into these schools then risked compromising their careers. Most musicians on the SFCRP tours were not career activists. Instead, they navigated a capricious commercial marketplace in an especially challenging political climate. The racially charged climate of newly desegregated schools limited the political and rhetorical possibilities of the SFCRP, especially for African American musicians.

Bernice Reagon personally experienced the limitations of the projects. Reagon's presentation of the cultural and social history of the South through "the unwritten culture of the black American" encountered resistance in predominately white schools in Georgia.⁸² In a telling account from the project evaluation, Reagon recalled the hostile reception she encountered in the classroom when teaching the "Black History Through Music" segment of the program.

When I arrived at the third session we were in our third room with additional students. I felt an immediate negative reaction to my presence. There was only one Black student present during the entire series, a young lady who seemed utterly lost in the hostile surroundings. My presentation was objective and tense. Tensions were felt by the students as they refrained from outbursts because of it. During work songs or spirituals when I made musical sounds that were distinctively Black to them, several students had to fight laughter. Each session grew worse, demanding more control from me. My presentation was characterized by my efforts to control a predominantly racist group. Because of the natural tensions and hostilities involved in such a struggle, the Black girl who seemed lost in the beginning was still lost when it was over.⁸³

Reagon's account demonstrates not just the obvious challenge of working across cultures, but the gap between the SFCRP's grounding vision and the reality of its new limitations. Reagon

⁸¹ Transcript of Board Meeting, p.8, March 28, 1976, folder 433, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸² "Music and History" Brochure, folder 183, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸³ Public School Project Proposal, folder 187, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

observed that the lone black student was “lost” or unable to locate herself or value her own traditions in a classroom full of white students. In Reagon’s eyes, the lesson did not move these students to a deeper cross-cultural appreciation.

The music and history programs in Georgia reveal telling dissonances about how Romaine and Reagon imagined culture as a pedagogical tool. New audiences and grants opened possibilities for community projects, but constrained the organization’s ability to pursue an expansive political vision. African American musicians who had been involved with the SFCRP struggled to negotiate a political climate that witnessed desegregation prioritizing white cultural norms in a new clash over cultural politics. As Waldo Martin noted, cultural politics for African Americans consisted of a “struggle for power in the face of white cultural hegemony.”⁸⁴ Thus, cultural conflict emerged that made interracial coalition building less politically salient. African American musicians instead envisioned new goals that transcended the original interracial aims of the SFCRP. While the projects endured into the mid-seventies, they became contested sites where members of the SFCRP, particularly African American musicians, challenged the organization’s cultural aims.

By the mid-seventies, the SFCRP’s vision of interracial cultural exchange had been essentially repurposed from its original connection to the movement. Early on, as Anne Romaine reflected, the goal of the SFCRP was desegregation: “At first we were given a very simple

⁸⁴ Martin, 4.

program. Just desegregation.”⁸⁵ Of course, the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement did usher in new political realities. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 *nominally* ended legal and political disfranchisement of African Americans. However in the late sixties and early seventies the SFCRP’s interracial stance, grounded in the radical act of bringing black and white musicians together, lost its political immediacy and salience and wrought tensions over cultural politics. A decade after their initial collaboration, Romaine and Reagon had realized their cultural work in profoundly different ways. While Romaine held fast to the interracial mission, Reagon focused on a broader sense of revitalization and cultural autonomy for African Americans.⁸⁶ Their divergence speaks to the tenuous possibilities of culture as an organizing tool in a post-Jim Crow South.

It is critical to contextualize the organization’s evolution within the broader musical and cultural transformation of the early seventies. First, the period witnessed a profound resurgence of cultural myths and even the “rediscovery of the admirable, even adorable South” after the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and Watergate.⁸⁷ Much of the population moved southward seeking economic security during the deindustrialization of the rust belt. Additionally, country music surged in popularity and crossed over into mainstream radio play. Country radio stations multiplied and women musicians enjoyed newfound commercial popularity. The music then became a site of tension between progress and tradition, as “the longtime opponents of social progress,” in the eyes of many American liberals, appeared to gain commercial success.⁸⁸ Anne

⁸⁵ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸⁶ See Lawrence W. Levine, “Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization,” in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, edited by John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 104-138.

⁸⁷ James C. Cobb, 84.

⁸⁸ Cobb., 88.

Romaine located her own musical aspirations within this moment and recorded a country album in 1976. Ironically, she maintained a progressive agenda even as country music retained its “southern” character and affiliation with whiteness, despite its mixed musical roots.

The Black Arts and Black Consciousness movement gained new cultural momentum that helped alter the meaning of interracial exchange.⁸⁹ Of course, the idea or existence of a “Black Consciousness” was hardly new. As SNCC organizer Charles Cobb noted, “A Black consciousness existed in every corner of the country where there were Black communities.”⁹⁰ However, the late sixties and early seventies witnessed a new “generational exchange of political and cultural ideas” among black youth, particularly those who had participated in the Civil Rights Movement.⁹¹ The Black Power, Black Consciousness, and Black Arts Movement shifted the conversation about cultural politics in a multifaceted and transnational wave. A whole generation of African Americans, many of whom like Reagon had committed their lives to the freedom struggle, began to “define the contours of a discrete black aesthetic” in a post-segregation moment.⁹² This impulse catalyzed a vibrant influx of new cultural production that offered an alternative to “western” or white American cultural ideals.

⁸⁹ For scholarship on the relationship between Black Power and the Black Arts Movement see; Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963), Charles E. Cobb, Jr. “Black in Different Colors,” *Massachusetts Review*, Waldo E. Martin and Joshua Bloom, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Mark Anthony Neal, *What The Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: the Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), Vincent Rickey, *Party Music: the Inside Story of the Black Panthers’ Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), Brian Ward *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁹⁰ Charles E. Cobb, Jr. “Black in Different Colors,” *Massachusetts Review*, 52 (2011), 176. Retrieved from <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/882829942?accountid=14244>.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹² Ongiri, 7.

Notably, both country music's newfound commercial success and the emergence of the Black Arts Movement reflect a central tension about race, culture, and southern identity. The word and identifier of "southern," resting at the heart of the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project, connoted a contested history. Historically, white defenders of Jim Crow had linked the system of oppression with a "southern way of life," thereby erasing African American political and cultural contributions to the South. Conversely, the idea of Black Consciousness clashed with a regional or "southern" identification and instead focused on locating the roots of black culture in an African homeland.⁹³ As this impulse strengthened among African American musicians, writers, and artists, the SFCRP and Romaine's mission conflicted with a divergent understanding of cultural heritage. Therefore, musicians like Reagon, part of the wave of the Black Arts Movement, were reluctant to constrain their identities and ambitions to the South.

Indeed Bernice Reagon located herself in this cultural movement early on. After the first tour in the spring of 1966, Reagon told Romaine that the tour would be her last as a performer. As Romaine recalled in a later interview, Reagon decided she would devote her efforts to Black Consciousness.⁹⁴ At that time Reagon had been touring with the Harambee Singers in Atlanta, organizing festivals, and working with SNCC. While Reagon decided to cease her time as a performer, she still maintained a seat on the board and helped with the public school projects and other festivals. Romaine remembered that Reagon qualified her departure with assurance saying, "don't be threatened by this, you keep on doing what you're doing, you keep on doing the

⁹³ Cobb, 127. For more information on the early roots of twentieth century Pan-Africanism and cultural revitalization see Levine, "Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization," in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, edited by John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 104-138.

⁹⁴ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

integrated tours and I'll support you. I just can't walk with you."⁹⁵ Reagon's decision to step back from touring highlights that early on, Reagon anticipated a conflict between her dedication to Black Consciousness and the SFCRP's mission.

Almost a decade later, Bernice Reagon initiated a straightforward, and telling, discussion about the organization's future cultural relevance. During a 1976 board meeting in Washington, D.C held to determine the direction of the organization, Reagon voiced her ambivalence about the organization's stance on combatting white supremacy and called into question the SFCRP's political aspirations. To illustrate, Reagon pointed to the role musicians assumed in the organization. She had originally hoped the tour would consist of musicians who were "socially responsible" and able to speak to issues of inequality through their music rather than just celebrating southern culture. Yet over time Reagon had become concerned that the festivals featured musicians with no background in the movement. She asked, "is it worthwhile to put on a tour [with] musicians that don't address nothing, but you get some good musicians and you put them on the stage in some sense so that they complement each other in terms of a sound, cultural evening. Is there validity in that, and would this organization be satisfied with that one?"⁹⁶ Here, Reagon wrestled with how the political purpose of the SFCRP differed from her own understanding about community organizing, culture, and performance.

The career Reagon forged outside the SFCRP demonstrates an alternative path that highlights the growing distinctions between her and Romaine's vision of cultural exchange. In 1973, Reagon founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, an ensemble of black women who toured nationally and internationally and expressed African diasporic history and culture through song.

⁹⁵ Transcript, Anne Romaine Oral History Interview, March 1995, by Sarah Horsley, folder 129, in the Anne Romaine Papers #20304, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁹⁶ Transcript of Board Meeting, March 28, 1976, Tape #8, folder 433, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Reagon made deliberate choices as the group navigated both political and commercial avenues. For example, she noted in the mid-eighties that if Sweet Honey was going to participate in an event, “it is necessary for us to know exactly what the issues are and that we are clear on our own positions...We don’t hit the stage to support any struggle before we have had this kind of collective analysis.”⁹⁷ As her stance demonstrates, Reagon valued a collective understanding of the marriage of culture and politics.

Like the SFCRP, Sweet Honey in the Rock oriented its music to service and community. Reagon stated, “From the beginning we took ourselves seriously as a community organization. We do come and serve when we are called.”⁹⁸ Similarly, the group fused tradition with a more current political purpose. Sweet Honey in the Rock combined Reagon’s knowledge of the nineteenth-century congregational singing tradition with more modern African American musical forms that developed over the twentieth century. The group also navigated the conventions of the commercial music marketplace as recording and touring artists by creating an independent record label and supplementing album sales revenue with touring. As Reagon reflected, Sweet Honey in the Rock “connected our survival as a group to our audiences.”⁹⁹ This orientation allowed the group to adapt to the political needs of the times and to its audiences in a way that the SFCRP could not.

Finally, Sweet Honey in the Rock provided sanctuary for former SNCC activists searching for a sense of community. Reagon’s music anchored people deeply connected to the grassroots Civil Rights Movement in the South. For example, Ruby Sales, a movement activist

⁹⁷ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Carry It On: Continuing the Legacy: An Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon,” by Ngoma Hill, *Broadside* #151, May 1984.

⁹⁸ Reagon, *We Who Believe in Freedom*, 67.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

from Southwest Georgia who risked her life during the Albany Movement, credits Bernice Johnson Reagon for the spiritual endurance she needed when she lost her faith in the church.

Almost fifty years later, Sales was able to recall the transformative impact of Reagon's music:

I think the paradox is that even when we think we've left home, we never really go anywhere. And so I think that although I thought that I was not religious, the truth of the matter is I was. And I went to church all the time and that was the Sweet Honey concerts, and Bernice Johnson Reagon kept us in church. And all of the songs that she sang and all of the music and the God talk that she would do from the stage, she became the preacher for the generation of African American young people.¹⁰⁰

For Sales, Reagon continued her work in the movement long after her days in SNCC had ended. Reagon provided a sense of "home," located in the source of music, that audiences could locate in a time of tremendous change and spiritual loss. Reagon maintained a sacred space, grounded in the movement tradition, for former organizers to process their experiences in community.

Yet the sense of community Reagon created did not depend on the involvement of white people, a reality Romaine struggled to embrace. Romaine's vision then diverged considerably from African American musicians forming a new cultural consciousness in the early seventies. Their desire for separate and autonomous cultural festivals conflicted with Romaine's vision for an enduring interracial vision. While the aspirations of African American musicians reflected cultural and political transformation, Romaine's vision remained fixed in the mid-sixties. Their disparate cultural politics inevitably caused conflicts within the organization.

One specific conflict surfaced between Anne Romaine and Jane Sapp, an African American gospel performer. She was a frequent member of the SFCRP's tours as well as a member of the African Diaspora Advisory group with Reagon. Sapp, a cultural worker like Reagon who had engaged Black communities in Alabama, encountered resistance when she tried to organize a festival in Greene County. The festival presented music from the Black Belt of

¹⁰⁰ Transcript, Ruby Sales Interview, "Where Does it Hurt" by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, September 15 2016, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/transcript/8937>.

Alabama and was sponsored by the Alabama Coalition for the Arts and Humanities. However, Romaine and Sapp disagreed about the “multinational” element of the program. Sapp hoped to only work with Black musicians to reflect the demographics of the area and reach out to local community groups, a mission the SFCRP had previously endorsed.

The conditions of Greene County are critical to acknowledge. Unlike Atlanta, Greene County was rural and sparsely populated. While the integrated school programming in Atlanta had enjoyed moderately positive reception, the school system in Greene County had experienced tremendous white flight and divestment. Therefore, if the SFCRP had tried to apply to a similar model that stressed cultural exchange and a shared history of the South in Greene County, it would have faced less than favorable reception. As Johnny Shines aptly noted, bringing white musicians into Greene County to talk about cultural exchange would have been tone deaf.¹⁰¹

Sapp, frustrated with Romaine, appears to have reached out to Johnny Shines. At the 1976 board meeting, Shines raised the problem pointing out that Sapp “had the feeling that she was doing something that was unwelcome by not asking white musicians that were down there in Greene County to participate.”¹⁰² Romaine had difficulty accepting that the SFCRP’s mission might not be applicable to a changing cultural and political climate and that African American musicians might be better attuned to the needs of their communities.

While the SFCRP sought to engage with local communities, its interracial mission locked into the static paradigm of shared cultural exchange was unable to serve the largely black areas of the Deep South. As demonstrated in the SFCRP’s evolution, African American artists

¹⁰¹ Transcript of Board Meeting, p.5, March 28, 1976, folder 433, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁰² Transcript of Board Meeting, p.5, March 28, 1976, folder 433, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

frequently suffered the most political consequences for organizing across cultures when white artists took minimal risks. Ruby Sales elaborated on this discrepancy in a 2016 interview:

We talk a lot about black theologies, but I want a liberating white theology. I want a theology that speaks to Appalachia. I want a theology that begins to deepen peoples understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them rather than call upon the part of themselves that's not relational. Because there's nothing wrong with being European American. That's not the problem. It's how you actualize that history and how you actualize that reality. It's almost like white people don't believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.¹⁰³

Sales' observation applies extraordinarily well to Romaine's original aims for the SFCRP.

Romaine originally centered culture as a liberating medium and sought to transform white shame into redemption, a goal that originated in the SSOC's failure with the White Folks Project.

Through cultural work, Romaine attempted to develop a consciousness of whiteness divorced from its legacy of violence in the Jim Crow South.

However, as Reagon's experiences in the public school programs demonstrated, integration often meant white cultural hegemony. Therefore, African American cultural workers such as Reagon and Sapp worried traditions long cultivated in Black spaces would be lost and intra-racial rather than interracial cultural exchange assumed a newfound importance. Ultimately, the mid-seventies marked a transitional moment when the SFCRP grappled with its identity as an organization and the forces--political, commercial, and cultural-- threatening to tear it apart.

While Romaine held fast to a vision of interracial cultural exchange that affirmed static conceptions of "tradition" and "roots," African American artists pushed back against the cultural consequences of desegregation. The SFCRP's original mission, then, became more regressive than liberating and limited the political possibilities of interracial coalition building.

¹⁰³ Transcript, Ruby Sales Interview, "Where Does it Hurt," by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, September 15 2016, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/transcript/8937>.

On a fundamental level, the evolution of the SFCRP reveals a story of activists and musicians who risked their personal safety to bring forth cultural and political change. Anne Romaine and Bernice Johnson Reagon imagined an interracial counter-vision that endured even amidst the immutability of white supremacy and a fracturing student movement. Reagon continued her involvement in the SFCRP well into the eighties, indicating her faith in the work of cultural exchange across racial lines. As she noted in her speech at the West Coast Women's Music Festival almost two decades later, this kind of work proved to be as difficult as breathing in thin air. "The only reason you would consider trying to team up with someone who could possibly kill you," Reagon perceived, "is because that's the only way you figure you can stay alive."¹⁰⁴

Historians have devoted considerable attention to the fracturing of the Civil Rights Movement in the late sixties. As this paper argues, the SFCRP did suffer from a bifurcation in cultural politics. Yet interrogating why the SFCRP evolved in response to external political pressures prompts new historical questions about memory, gender, and the movement to consider. The organization's internal tensions around culture and cultural politics speak not only to the legacy of the movement, but also the South, a region in which memory remains continually contested. The question of memory, which historians of the Civil Rights Movement Leigh Raiford and Renée Romano deem "the process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past," looms large within the SFCRP's mission and evolution.¹⁰⁵ The cultural work that both Romaine and Reagon engaged in over the course of their careers is

¹⁰⁴ Reagon, "Coalition Politics," 357.

¹⁰⁵ Lee Raiford and Renee Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xiii.

essentially memory work. The very name they agreed upon, “The Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project,” indicated that there was something that needed to be remembered in order to be revived.

Consequently, the SFCRP offers a rich case study that brings into conversation lingering connections between cultural history, memory, and the Civil Rights Movement. These connections surface most prominently through the work of Bernice Johnson Reagon. Perhaps more so than any other Civil Rights Movement activist, she has grappled with new language to think about music, memory and culture. Throughout the duration of her career, she refused to delineate culture from politics and politics from culture. Instead, similarly to her theory of sound and body, she forged new understandings of community and memory. Consequently, as she maintained her faith in Romaine and the SFCRP, she also remained vigilant about the differences between cultural exchange and consumption. In an especially resonant moment during the 1976 board meeting, Reagon vocalized her concerns about white consumption of black culture, particularly in the commercial realm:

There is that cross-cultural attraction that’s there...I can go to white audiences and they enjoy it and snow me over. When I sing to black kids they have to go through a tremendous thing. They have to deal with their whole history and everything that sound means and in terms of this project... The major thing we're talking about is those areas where the ground was not plowed—right at home. If Johnny Shines dies, there could be 55 white blues people who can play just like Johnny Shines but can't take it nowhere. I think it’s important that we recognize the continuity of creativity is some possibility of encouraging the community that created that music to support it, because you can find people who play Bach just like Bach wrote it and if that’s what it’s about, that’s what it’s about, but I’ve never known folk music to be just about that.¹⁰⁶

Here, Reagon highlighted the political limits of interracial cultural exchange. As she remarked, the fact that white audiences consumed black culture was not inherently bad. As Reagon

¹⁰⁶ Transcript of Board Meeting, Tape #2, March 28, 1976, folder 433, in the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project Collection 20004, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

observed, many white people responded to black musical forms they were previously unfamiliar with through “cross-cultural attraction” such as Romaine’s original feelings of “awe” during her days as a student organizer. However, it is important to recognize that white consumption of black culture lacks the political weight of its mirror image: black consumption of white culture. Reagon’s earlier discussion about her exposure to European choral singing in high school illustrates this point: “It was an integral part of the educational culture created in the Black community and an indicator of an African American strategy of advancing within the larger society by becoming fluent in the ways of that culture.¹⁰⁷ Reagon learned European repertoire not merely out of curiosity or “cross-cultural attraction.” Instead, she responded to the pressure to assimilate, a pressure absent for white people. Reagon kept this pressure in mind when she expressed concern about passing on the tradition of the African-American congregational singing tradition:

I felt like there was no air I breathed that these songs didn’t exist in. I didn’t even think of them as songs I needed to learn. They just came with the territory. I make that point because I feel they’re not being passed today in the same way.¹⁰⁸

Reagon’s words point to more significant questions about the cultural legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. In the decades following her involvement in the movement, Reagon repeatedly affirmed the necessity of cultural transmission among African Americans. “Folk” music, for Reagon, was not just a genre that represented anti-commercial values, but rather served as a conduit that connected African Americans to their history and generational memory in rapidly transforming political times. As Ruby Sales implied in her recollection of a Sweet Honey concert, Reagon perhaps knew that the cultural work of reviving African American traditions would guide the unfinished political work of the movement. While scholars and activists alike

¹⁰⁷ Reagon, *We Who Believe in Freedom*, 149.

¹⁰⁸ Video Recording, Reagon, *The Songs are Free*.

have debated whether the movement was “successful” in social and political spheres, Reagon knowingly maintained a faith in the cultural sphere to hold communities together.

What we are left with, then, is a tangled legacy of movement culture and the women who sought to understand its implications and uses. Consequently, the tensions present in Romaine and Reagon’s fragile coalition also illuminate new historical questions about gender and the movement. Scholars of African American women’s history have long broken open the historical meaning of raced categories of “femininity” and womanhood” and chronicled how movements for women’s equality have often excluded African American women. Notably, the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement addressed the racism embedded in the “white women’s movement” and sought to construct a new politics grounded in the awareness of the intersecting experiences of racism and misogyny.¹⁰⁹

Bernice Johnson Reagon’s work with Sweet Honey draws from this emerging black feminist consciousness that found a new platform in the seventies. Reagon found her voice through cultural work and used Sweet Honey as a conduit for black feminist political participation. While the scholarship on African American women’s history has been rich, particularly the recent upsurge in Civil Rights Movement scholarship focused on the crucial political and intellectual leadership of women, it has not strayed far from socio-historical approaches. As Reagon’s work demonstrates, culture proves to be an equally rich cite of inquiry to understand emerging and diverging feminisms. Both Reagon and Romaine carved out leadership roles as cultural workers in the movement. Yet their respective paths speak to profoundly different understandings about the use of culture as an organizing tool. Subsequently,

¹⁰⁹ The Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” April 1977, http://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

while the SFCRP revealed fissures around race, in this case, divergent cultural politics contain an embedded politics of gender.

Cultural politics then offer a valuable lens to better understand the tensions percolating at the root of coalition building between black and white women. As Reagon affirmed in 1981, “Today wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building. And if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work.”¹¹⁰ In Reagon’s eyes, culture constitutes the very essence of what it means to be human.¹¹¹ Subsequently, racism and white supremacy, which endure through institutions that equate whiteness with full citizenship and humanity, remain inextricably bound up with questions about culture. Reagon noted in a later interview that white people have had a tremendously difficult time developing a cultural consciousness. She stated clearly, “the culture does not demand that you work on a consciousness of who you are. You just exist. And you’re supposed to be here. And it’s all yours.”¹¹² For Reagon, the fact white people have never had to construct an oppositional culture or consciousness presents one of the main challenges to interracial coalition building.

This challenge haunted Anne Romaine. She maintained a commitment to the redemption of a white racial consciousness yet her rush to “cover her own cultural nakedness,” reflected the core problem that whiteness is not a culture but rather a political position. As the SSOC found out in 1964, working-class white people saw a benefit in holding fast to white supremacy. Romaine’s cultural project organized around working-class whiteness, then, proved untenable.¹¹³ While Scotts-Irish or Anglo-American cultural roots exists in the south, “white” as a cultural

¹¹⁰ Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 362.

¹¹¹ Sound Recording, Bernice Johnson Reagon Oral History Interview, by Cathy Ennis, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ See Joel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

category rings hollow because it means nothing outside of its political significance. Ruby Sales, whose thoughts at the end of 2016 resonate with even more salience now, echoed the challenges of integration without an investment in ending white supremacy.

We left the black community unguarded. And the mission was no longer a beloved community, but the mission became integration. And what that meant was that generations of young African American children were pushed to achieve this mission, and we sent them into places that were unsafe, where they were humiliated and their egos were decimated in structures. As Toni Morrison said, “Out there, they don’t love our children.”¹¹⁴

Sales’ thoughts mirror the racial fault lines that surfaced as the SFCRP evolved. It is almost as if she had witnessed the very moment Reagon recounted about the young black girl in a majority white classroom “who seemed lost in the beginning and was still lost when it was over.” Sales, like Reagon, knew that the movement’s victories also came with sacrifices. Reagon understood more than most that many of the sacrifices of coalition building surface in conflicts over culture.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon later reflected, “I think the sharing of cultural expressions is very important. I think you have to be very careful about the way it’s done and you have to have some sense about when you do damage but I say always take the risk rather than not try to share it all.”¹¹⁵ Her thoughts leave us with questions to consider moving forward about the risks of coalition building and the meaning of cultural exchange. Of course, the tensions that haunted Romaine and Reagon’s fragile coalition continue to surface in conversations about coalition building and the political legacy of the movement. The roots, evolution, and legacy of their shared yet impermanent coalition, the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project, offers one way to understand current struggles to build interracial coalitions in a continually evolving political landscape.

¹¹⁴ Transcript, Ruby Sales, “Where Does it Hurt?”

¹¹⁵ Sound Recording, Bernice Johnson Reagon Oral History Interview, by Therese Spaude, UC 1303 A/1 UC Box 228, January 27, 1982, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

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