
BLACK WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE:

The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson

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Since their earliest days in American society, many people of African descent have worked to combat the racism and oppression confronting them. Some of these activists were women, and a select few of them even became famous. Names like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman are familiar to most Americans. Yet, those few African-American female freedom fighters who have been elevated to legendary status have often been forced to confront a very personal issue in the midst of their efforts to free their people: the issue of redefining their womanhood. Against the backdrop of the peculiar status of African-American women in U.S. society, black female activist efforts have routinely been tied to a negative assessment of black womanhood.

This is a consequence of negative notions of African-American women that are firmly anchored in the nineteenth century and slavery. In fact, slaveholders defined African-American womanhood in their own best interests, shifting their treatment of female slaves to meet their needs:

Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women.¹

In short, "when it was profitable to exploit them [slave women] as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles."²

At the same time, critical nineteenth-century political and economic changes began to have a profound impact on definitions of white womanhood. It was at this time that sharply differentiated gender roles emerged. Many middle-class nineteenth-century white Americans became convinced that men and women were so different that their duties, obligations, and responsibilities actually constituted "separate spheres."³ In this context expectations of proper female behavior came to be defined by women's domestic duties. "Women's activities were increasingly limited to the care

of children, the nurturing of [the] husband, and the physical maintenance of the home."⁴

Negative views of African-American womanhood combined with restrictive notions of white womanhood and persisted until well into the twentieth century. Both black and white women were affected by them—but in very different ways. Many white women were intent on questioning and testing the old established limits. At the same time, this white female restlessness contrasted sharply with black female aspirations. As black economic expectations rose during the post-World War II period, many African-American women would have been only too happy to stay home and cultivate a separate female sphere for a change.⁵ Yet, at this time financial realities continued to push large numbers of African-American women out of the home and into the job market. In such an atmosphere questions about black womanhood and white womanhood persisted. It was a confusing and unsettling time.

In this volatile and fluid atmosphere one modern African-American female activist who sought to define her womanhood as she gained power within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. Robinson began her activist career in the Atlanta Student Movement. She was a freshman at Spelman College in Atlanta when the sit-ins first started. Early on, though, Robinson began to look beyond Atlanta and concentrate her efforts on the national arena and SNCC. Over two decades after Robinson's most active period, many of her movement colleagues still have vivid memories of her. Friends and associates were able to recall with remarkable clarity a wealth of detail about Robinson's activist career and her personal life. Consequently, I conducted interviews with a number of those who were close to her, including family members, childhood friends, Atlanta University Center associates, and SNCC comrades.

Regardless of the circumstances of their relationship with Robinson, most associates identified her as a powerful woman. In many instances this identification resulted in curious perceptions of the importance of Robinson's gender in relation to her power. For example, co-worker Courtland Cox insisted that people in SNCC "didn't view her as a man or a woman, they viewed her as a strength."⁶ SNCC organizer Mukasa (Willie Ricks) insisted that gender was not an issue since "her personality was so strong . . . didn't nothing else matter."⁷ One of her earlier acquaintances, Reverend Albert Brinson, had a chance to observe Ruby when she was a Spelman College student just beginning her movement work. Brinson remembered that a typical Spelman student was "always taught to be a lady. A lady stood back and waited to be waited upon by a man." Robinson

did not fit in this atmosphere, though, since "she was not the lady-like kind. . . . She was rather aggressive."⁸

The existence of such perceptions of Robinson raises crucial questions. How did she see this issue of gender in view of her growing power within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee? Also, what influences in Robinson's early life shaped the balance that she would eventually strike between her activism and her gender identity? Indeed, an examination of her upbringing reveals intriguing glimpses of the influences that provoked her activism and shaped her views of proper gender roles.

Ruby Doris Smith was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 25, 1942, the second oldest of seven children. She was raised in the city's black Summerhill neighborhood. The family home at 794 Fraser Street was a large frame structure that had both a store and a beauty shop attached to it. Ruby Smith's mother, Alice Smith, supplemented the family income by operating the beauty shop, while her father, J. T. Smith, operated the store and engaged in a variety of other occupations. Smith drove a cab, owned a used furniture store, tried his hand at the moving business, and operated a restaurant. Later, when Ruby Smith was in high school, her father became a Baptist minister. He eventually founded his own church.⁹ Even though the family did not have a lot of money, J. T. and Alice Smith were able to provide a comfortable living for their children. Just as important as the income they provided was the example they set: the source of their income was dependent on black patronage rather than white support.

As Robinson grew to maturity she became involved in a variety of social activities. In 1958, with the enthusiastic blessing of her family, she became a debutante, just as her older sister, Mary Ann, had done a year earlier. The Smith sisters' formal introduction to African-American social life clearly indicates the family's and their daughters' acceptance of African-American middle-class standards for proper female behavior. Other actions and attitudes that characterized Robinson's formative years also suggest that she accepted the 1950s notions of proper African-American middle-class female behavior. For example, she was head majorette with the Price High School marching band. She was very concerned about her appearance and particularly liked expensive clothes that would flatter her figure.

Ruby Smith and her sisters and brothers enjoyed a secure existence in their separate black world as they grew to maturity. They had strong adult support, and they had their own churches, schools, and social activities. Also, within the confines of the middle-class value system that governed their lives, the Smith children comfortably embraced the gender roles that were a part of that value system. No matter how insulated and comfortable they were, though, the reality of racism and segregation in the United States

managed to intrude from time to time. Moreover, the injurious effects of segregation were equally traumatic for males and females. In the segregated South of the 1950s gender counted for much less than race.

African-American youngsters of this generation reacted in a variety of ways to the ugly reality of segregation. Ruby Smith's older sister Mary Ann (Wilson) remembered that she was aware of segregation, but "everything was so separated you just didn't think about it."¹⁰ Despite this perception, confrontation was inevitable. Wilson sharply recalled the pain resulting from one of those confrontations. One day she boarded a bus on her way home from school. Since the bus on this route was usually filled with African-American passengers, most of them generally sat wherever they chose. Consequently, without even thinking, Wilson sat down right behind the driver. But there was a white woman sitting behind her, and when Wilson realized this, she jumped up and moved behind this woman. At that moment Wilson knew something was terribly wrong.¹¹

When young Ruby Doris Smith encountered segregation she reacted to it quite strongly. Her younger sister Catherine witnessed one encounter that occurred in a drugstore located at the corner of Capitol and Georgia Avenue. The Smith children often bought ice cream from this drugstore. Catherine Robinson recalled that store clerks generally seemed reluctant to serve black customers. That reluctance was particularly apparent one day when the Smith sisters ordered an ice cream cone. "So, they pulled the cone down. . . . [Ruby] waited till they fixed it and got ready for her to pay. . . . She said, 'Oh, you can keep that one, I won't be eating that one.' " The baffled and annoyed clerk could not understand Ruby's behavior. She angrily insisted, " 'You ordered this.' " An equally angry Ruby explained, " 'But you're not going to put your hands on my cone.' She knew that when whites came in, they used a tissue to pull the cone down; and when blacks came in, they would use their hands."¹² This was not the only time she confronted the reality of racism during her early years. Robinson recalled, "I was conscious of my blackness. Every young Negro growing up in the South has thoughts about the racial situation."¹³ She also remembered her reaction to the white people with whom she came in contact when she was a youngster. "I didn't recognize their existence and they didn't recognize mine. . . . My only involvement was in throwing rocks at them."¹⁴

As Ruby Doris Smith Robinson passed through adolescence during the 1950s, she was keenly aware of the broader issues of racial injustice. She saw others suffer the same indignities that confronted her. Yet, she also saw the signs of change: the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Brown Decision, and the integration of Little Rock's Central High School were powerful symbols for this generation. At the same time, the African-American teachers at Price High School where Robinson was a student routinely

discussed issues of race with their students. They encouraged these youngsters to think critically and to consider possibilities for change.

This heightened consciousness regarding segregation that characterized the 1950s occurred amidst the growing interest in reassessing gender roles in the modern U.S. This juxtaposition of race and gender issues served to focus particular attention on African-American women. Consequently, the efforts of white journalists, scholars, and physicians to examine the female role generally were complemented by a special interest in black women's roles by various members of the African-American community. Studies produced by scholars along with articles in the African-American press during this era contained mixed signals about black female prospects and accomplishments.

An article in the popular black press entitled "What's Wrong With Negro Women?" provides a graphic example of the negative assessment accepted by some. The author of that article, Roi Ottley, criticized African-American women in practically every area of life. He declared that African-American women were not interested in furthering their education, and that they were culturally backward as well. He went on to insist that they were shallow dilettantes who were primarily interested in embracing the vulgar trappings of middle-class life. Above all, these women were not fulfilling one of their most important responsibilities, Ottley charged: "*Too few Negro women contribute to the race fight* [emphasis added]. Beyond one or two national organizations and sororities, they do not even organize for their own rights as women. . . ." ¹⁵

While the Ottley article is extremely critical, it is also quite revealing. It clearly suggests that the proper role for the modern African-American woman should include civil rights activism and an emphasis on educational achievement. A more thoughtful and sympathetic view is provided by author Lerone Bennett in a 1960 edition of *Ebony* magazine. In an article entitled "The Negro Woman," Bennett asserted that most people accepted the notion that the African-American woman's role was one of domination. This history of domination resulted in a healthy sense of independence. Yet, it was that very independence that created a dilemma for African-American women. "Independence, as many white women have recently discovered, is not an unmixed blessing. . . . One result of the traditional independence of the Negro woman is that she is more in conflict with her innate biological role than the white woman." ¹⁶

Thus, by the 1950s some members of the African-American community began to express concern about the issue of black women's roles. In many instances African-American sentiment tended to favor a far more inclusive role than the restrictive and traditional view that tied women's roles more firmly to the home. But, there was still a lot of uncertainty. It

was during this volatile period that Ruby Doris Smith began her college career; she entered Spelman College as a freshman in the fall of 1959.

Even though there was a strain of conservatism at many black colleges and universities—including the Atlanta University Center schools¹⁷—this conservatism existed in the midst of an atmosphere that encouraged students to question the South's racial etiquette. Some faculty and administrators in Atlanta University Center schools regularly reminded students that they must play a role in their own liberation. Others, however, were not nearly as supportive as Howard Zinn, a Spelman history professor who noted that:

The new Spelman girl is having an effect on faculty and administrators. Many who were distressed and critical when they first learned their sweet young things were sitting behind bars, later joined in the applause of the Negro community and the nation at large.¹⁸

While Spelman worked hard to provide a nurturing and supportive atmosphere that encouraged students to think critically and act assertively, it also provided training in etiquette that rivaled any charm school. Throughout the 1950s many of the college's faculty members and administrators clearly remained committed to training proper "ladies" for the black middle class. Thus, the Spelman College that shaped the young Ruby Doris Smith Robinson accepted expanded limits for African-American women's roles, but also expected traditional behavior. In short, young African-American women of this generation were told that they could and should do it all.

In this hospitable atmosphere Robinson, like many other young black people of her generation, became convinced that change was possible.¹⁹ Furthermore, many saw themselves as the agents of that change. Then Greensboro happened. The start of sit-ins there galvanized black college students all over the South. Robinson immediately considered the prospect of sit-ins in Atlanta, but was not prepared to take the initiative. When the Atlanta University Center students formed the Atlanta Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, though, she enthusiastically joined. The group quickly staged its first demonstration at the state capitol, and Robinson was with them. She described the events:

I went through the food line in the restaurant at the State Capitol with six other students, but when we got to the cashier, she wouldn't take our money. She ran upstairs to get the Governor. The Lieutenant-Governor came down and told us to leave. We didn't, and went to the county jail.²⁰

This was only the beginning of Robinson's activist career. She became heavily involved in the Atlanta student movement. While she did not

assume a leadership role, she did gain a reputation for bravery and assertiveness. Atlanta Student Movement colleague Julian Bond witnessed one of the incidents that added to her reputation. Bond recalled that on one occasion a group of Atlanta students decided to desegregate Grady Hospital—a large, public hospital. Although Grady admitted African-American patients, it had segregated entrances. When black Atlanta students went in the hospital's white entrance the receptionist just inside the door immediately told them they could not enter on that side; "and besides," she insisted, "you're not sick anyway."²¹ As the students stood in the entrance trying to decide how to proceed, Robinson boldly walked up to the receptionist's desk, looked her in the eye, bent over and vomited all over the desk, straightened up and demanded to know, "Is that sick enough for you?"²²

While Robinson continued to work with the Atlanta Student Movement, she became involved on the national scene as early as February of 1961. At that time the new Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee decided to initiate a "jail no bail" policy. The arrest of a group of Friendship College students, who were jailed for protesting in Rock Hill, South Carolina, provided the occasion for the initiation of this new policy. Throughout the fall of 1960 members of SNCC had debated the wisdom of pursuing this strategy. Most recognized that the increasing number of students jailed for protesting activities was beginning to strain the financial resources of the black community to the limit. In many instances members of these communities—even those in difficult financial circumstances—were generous contributors to bail funds. It was not uncommon for property owners to pledge their houses in an effort to raise bail money. By late 1960 some in SNCC expressed alarm that the depletion of community resources might begin to strangle the life out of the movement.

On the other hand, if protestors insisted on serving their full sentences, this could put pressure on the white community that might hasten movement victories. As white southerners were faced with the logistical and financial nightmare of housing and feeding increasing numbers of demonstrators serving jail time, many reasoned, white tax payers would become much more willing to accede to movement demands. Once SNCC voted to pursue the jail no bail strategy, the organization immediately dispatched a delegation to Rock Hill. They were directed to demonstrate and refuse bail once they were arrested. When the delegation was chosen, Robinson was not among them, but her older sister Mary Ann was. Mary Ann Wilson vividly recalled that when she went home to pack, she began to have second thoughts. At the same time, Robinson began to express an interest in going. "So what happened eventually is Ruby Doris talked it up, and I just bowed out and let her go."²³ After Robinson and the other students

were arrested in Rock Hill, they spent thirty days in the York County, South Carolina, jail. Upon completion of her sentence, Robinson returned to Atlanta on March 18, 1961. At that time the *Atlanta Inquirer* reported that she was "ready, if necessary, to do it again."²⁴

Ruby Doris Robinson soon got her chance to do it again. By May of 1961 she decided to join the Freedom Rides. After being menaced by white mobs, she and the other riders were arrested and jailed. She eventually served a sixty-day jail sentence in Mississippi. Shortly after her scheduled release on August 11, 1961, Robinson decided to work with some of her SNCC colleagues involved in voter registration in McComb, Mississippi.²⁵ She was always willing to volunteer for the most hazardous movement duty. Furthermore, in such circumstances colleagues could depend on Robinson to be bold and daring.

Because of her attitude and her actions, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson soon became a legend—even among the bold and brave young people of SNCC. Most people in the early days of SNCC could recount at least one Ruby Doris Robinson story. For example, Julian Bond remembered that when a delegation of SNCC staff was preparing to board a plane for Africa in the fall of 1964, an airline representative told them that the plane was full even though they had tickets. He wanted to know if they would wait and take a later flight. This angered Robinson so much that, without consulting the rest of the group, she went and sat down in the jetway and refused to move. They were given seats on that flight.²⁶

James Bond, who worked in the SNCC print shop, witnessed another incident. The incident occurred when a group of SNCC staff, including Robinson, went to the airport to meet some of the organization's celebrity supporters. The first plane the group met had Marlon Brando and Tony Franciosa on it. The group then went to a different gate to meet a second plane:

And as we stood out at the gate waiting—and the first person to come off the plane was Governor [George] Wallace. And Ruby Doris went up to him and said "How are you Governor," and introduced herself and said, "I've spent some time in your jails." And he said, "Well, I hope they treated you well, and if you're ever back, look me up."²⁷

She never did.

While Robinson's assertiveness, brashness, and courage were important, they were not unique. Rather, her actions and her attitude fit comfortably in a context of boldness displayed by many African-American women over time. A number of cases illustrating this attitude exist within the civil rights movement. Consider the example of Annie Pearl Avery. During the course of a demonstration in Montgomery, Alabama, Avery came face-to-

face with a white policeman who had a billy club aimed straight at her head. He had already beaten several others. Avery "reached up, grabbed the club and said, 'Now what you going to do, motherfucker?' " The policeman was awed. Avery slipped back into the crowd of demonstrators.²⁸ Cynthia Washington, on the other hand, became a SNCC project director in a rural Alabama County where there had previously not been any civil rights workers. Because she was convinced that a car would make her too conspicuous a target for racist authorities, Washington ditched the car and organized the county from the back of a mule.²⁹

Even though the behavior of African-American women activists like these did not always fit contemporary notions of proper female behavior, they still fit comfortably into that established tradition of African-American female assertiveness that came straight out of slavery. Yet, what was considered acceptable and normal in the black community was not necessarily acceptable to white American society. Consequently, African-American women whose actions were applauded by other African Americans received the message from the larger American society that those actions were somehow unladylike. Furthermore, regardless of how they acted, their race had always consigned black women to a category other than female. For over three centuries they had been treated differently from white women in a society that eagerly embraced a white female standard of beauty and propriety.

In view of such differential treatment, gender roles and black and white female perspectives on issues of oppression were necessarily quite different. As young white women of the sixties generation explored the gender limitations imposed by their society, they collided with African-American women who came out of a black tradition that had a less restricted vision. Cynthia Washington clearly recalled how different their perspectives were. In the fall of 1964 Washington's white co-worker Casey Hayden complained that women were being limited to office work. An exasperated Washington simply could not understand Hayden's complaint:

What she said didn't make any particular sense to me because, at the time, I had my own project in Bolivar County, Mississippi. A number of other black women also directed their own projects. What Casey and other white women seemed to want was an opportunity to prove they could do something other than office work. I assumed that if they could do something else, they'd probably be doing that.³⁰

Washington recognized how hard the work of a project director was, and besides, "it wasn't much fun." Because of her insider's view, she was at a loss to understand why white women were complaining about their

assignments. In fact, their discontent over such issues only convinced Washington "how crazy they [white women] were."³¹

While white women's perspectives were very difficult for African-American women to understand, white society's disrespect for their womanhood was almost too painful to bear. One African-American female civil rights worker frankly expressed that pain:

We've been getting beaten up for years trying to integrate lunch counters, movies, and so on, and nobody has ever paid us no attention or wrote about us. But these white girls come down here for a few months and get all the publicity. Everybody talks about how brave and courageous *they* are. What about us?³²

Another black female civil rights worker was both angered and amazed by the treatment she received. When she was with a group demonstrating at a bus station "a cop grabbed me by the arm and slapped my face. I don't know why I was surprised, but I really was." She decided to remind him of a basic tenet of southern etiquette. "I looked at him and I say, 'Listen Man, take another look at me. I'm a woman! You don't hit a woman! Didn't they teach you that?' He looked kinda sorry, but he say, 'You're a niggah and that's all you are!'"³³

Such a pervasive and negative view was bound to wound black women's views of their own womanhood. As a blunt, outspoken, black, female activist Ruby Doris Smith Robinson was clearly the victim of such negative views. There is an additional factor in Robinson's case, however, that further reinforced negative views of her womanhood. That additional factor was her appearance. Robinson grew to maturity in a society that, from its earliest days, had judged African women by a European standard of beauty. Many women of African descent had only to look in the mirror to see that they could never measure up physically. But many tried, and it was often quite painful.

Zohara Simmons, one of Robinson's SNCC colleagues and a fellow Spelman student, was keenly aware of the European standard of beauty that was idealized by so many. That awareness was born of Simmons's painful experience on the Spelman campus. Spelman was famous for the beauty of its student body, which, translated, meant that a fairly high proportion of the students had light skin, keen features, and straight or nearly straight hair. Because Simmons was dark skinned, she experienced a great deal of pain. But, it was often caused less by white reaction than by black rejection. She insisted, "Some of the Morehouse guys were so nasty to a person who looked like myself. OVERT. I mean, straight up. . . ."³⁴ Appearance was important, but African-American women were powerless to change their appearance, at least permanently. Feelings of insecurity

about their looks could and did lead to the application of desperate measures: "Cosmetic preparations for lightening skin and straightening hair represent a multi-million dollar market among Negroes not favored with Caucasoid features." In fact, according to some, the African-American female concern about appearance led many women to pursue an "unending search for some approximation of the white ideal."³⁵ It was a terrible burden to carry around.

Ruby Doris Robinson had to carry her share of this black woman's burden. She was not particularly light skinned, she had broad features, and her hair was not naturally straight. Like so many African-American women of her generation she wrestled with negative views of who and what she was that were popularized by white society, but then embraced, at least in part, by African-American society. Evidence of black acceptance of such negative assessments was abundant and pervasive. In fact, the African-American author of one popular magazine article noted that such black acceptance had a profound impact:

Negro women, according to the consensus of male opinion, have some sort of inferiority complex where white women are concerned. . . . Unwittingly, much of this feeling, if it exists is inspired by men themselves—at least, as far as I can see. Too many Negro men have loudly sang [sic] the praises of white women they have known.³⁶

Such pervasive negative notions of black female character, combined with Robinson's assertive activist demeanor in the field, helped shape perceptions of her by movement colleagues in the early years. By late 1962, however, Robinson became much less active in the field. At that point she became a permanent fixture in SNCC's central office in Atlanta. In this setting colleagues continued to recognize her assertiveness; and she soon gained a reputation as an uncompromising administrator. She eventually became the only female Executive Secretary the organization ever had. Co-workers agreed that Robinson was an exceptionally talented administrator. "She had great facility with words. She had such quick ability to think and conceptualize."³⁷ Through it all, Robinson was tough. She demanded hard work and dedication from all of those around her. She would not allow anyone to shirk his or her responsibilities. Jack Minnis, a member of SNCC's research staff, insisted that people were never able to fool Ruby because she had a "100 percent effective shit detector."³⁸

As SNCC's membership enlarged and its character changed over time, it became increasingly difficult to administer. But Robinson tried. She made hard decisions, and she eventually had a great deal of influence in SNCC. She used whatever tactics were necessary to keep people on the job so that the organization could continue to function. Robinson would threaten,

cajole, insist, and demand. Such administrative tactics provoked a wide range of reactions from movement colleagues. Mukasa described some of those reactions. "She's nice, she was kind, she was in charge, she was hateful. She was mean, and at different points you would hate her. You dislike her, you disagreed with her, and you agreed with her, and you liked her, and you loved her."³⁹

Robinson's reputation as a tough female administrator constituted an important challenge to general notions of woman's place in the 1960s in the U.S. At the same time, even in the context of more broadly defined women's roles in the African-American community, Robinson's position as a leader in a male-dominated organization still made her an anomaly. Of course, SNCC was more egalitarian in many respects than the other civil rights groups: the organization had a number of black female field secretaries, project directors, and local leaders. Yet, even in SNCC, there was a great deal of "male posturing" in the early 1960s, and "overt sexism" by the end of the decade when Black Power became popular.⁴⁰ Regardless of her gender, though, SNCC colleagues insist that Robinson was respected by her co-workers—both male and female. In an effort to keep that respect, some suspected that she carefully and consciously emphasized the assertive, blunt, and independent part of her nature.

On the other hand, some in SNCC looked beyond her leadership and observed another side of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. Kwame Ture [Stokely Carmichael], for example, remembered, "I found Ruby Doris to be a real pretty sister with a pleasant smile. . . . If she wasn't my sister, you know, I'd say she had a fine body."⁴¹ SNCC co-worker Mildred Forman recalled the tender and domestic side of Ruby that was especially evident after the birth of her son.

That was, I think, one of the best moments of her life. She was ecstatic over the baby and the husband; and she was a good mother. And she was always mothering that baby . . . she just beamed and glowed with the baby.⁴²

Ruby only knew Clifford Robinson a few months before she married him in 1963. In fact their courtship was so brief and so private that the two were married before many of Robinson's SNCC colleagues even realized they were seriously involved. SNCC co-worker Stanley Wise clearly recalled his surprise. "I mean I never saw them stand together, I never saw them hold hands, I mean I didn't even know they were married until I went to their house and saw that's who Cliff was."⁴³ SNCC staffer Bobbi Yancey recalled that secretive romances were not that uncommon among the organization's members. Furthermore, Yancey reasoned, Robinson may have been concerned about how marriage might affect her colleagues'

perceptions of her. After all, the tough, blunt, and uncompromising image Ruby projected as a leader was incompatible with the qualities many Americans in the 1960s thought a good wife should possess. Yancey concluded, "She [Ruby] may have felt that it was going against her image to have this person on the side."⁴⁴

Many were particularly surprised that Robinson's new husband was an outsider. Clifford Robinson did not remain an outsider very long, however. He soon joined the SNCC staff as a mechanic and worked on the cars in the Sojourner Motor Fleet. Even though he joined the organization, he was less committed to the movement than he was to his new wife. Many SNCC colleagues agree that he joined SNCC because he loved Ruby Smith and she was committed to the movement. Essentially, when Clifford Robinson married twenty-one-year-old Ruby Doris Smith, he also married the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. By this time she had been working in SNCC for over three years and a large part of her identity was inextricably bound up in the organization. Movement co-worker Reginald Robinson remembered the way in which many of Robinson's colleagues viewed her husband. In Reginald Robinson's estimation, "he was not involved—he was Ruby's husband."⁴⁵ In fact, Clifford Robinson freely admitted that if he and Ruby Smith had not been married he never would have joined SNCC. Mukasa succinctly described the newlyweds' relationship to SNCC. "Cliff was the husband, but Ruby Doris was the boss [in the organization]."⁴⁶ Regardless of the extent of his involvement, Clifford Robinson had to cope with an uncommon situation. He was married to one of the most powerful women in a major civil rights organization, and that meant that he and his new wife faced a number of difficult issues. Strains were inevitable.

One of the most important issues the Robinsons had to resolve was the question of establishing a balance of power in their relationship. Obviously, Ruby Robinson exercised a fair amount of power in SNCC. But what about her power within the marriage? Some insist that she dominated the relationship. SNCC colleague Dorie Ladner agreed. She remarked, "He seemed to have been in awe of her, and under her spell."⁴⁷ Ladner continued:

I was a little surprised that she got married as early as she did. I always [pictured] her staying single much longer and uh, being more or less the woman who was in charge and . . . see the other side of it was that she wanted a family . . . but her husband was also very supportive of her. And I saw him as being weaker than she. . . . And he looked up to her. . . . When I met Cliff and saw his bearing, I knew that she was in control.⁴⁸

Others in the organization viewed the marriage very differently. Ruby Robinson's friend and colleague Freddie Biddle insisted that Ruby "had this husband who wanted to really dominate her."⁴⁹ According to Biddle, "she [Ruby] was definitely sensitive to what he liked and what he didn't like. But yet she tried as much as possible not to, not to be dominated by that whole process."⁵⁰ In all likelihood both descriptions of the Robinsons' relationship are accurate. As newlyweds they were undoubtedly testing limits and trying to establish a balance of power in their relationship. The fact of their unique position as a husband/powerful wife team in SNCC made the establishment of that balance a difficult proposition, indeed.

Regardless of how hard the Robinsons worked to keep their relationship in balance, evidence of strain soon became apparent. Movement colleague Emma Bell Moses clearly recalled witnessing incidents that indicated strains. Zohara Simmons also remembered seeing evidence of strains. She described a particularly illustrative incident:

I can remember. . . , you run in the office and he's [Clifford] standing there waiting on her to go. And. . . , everybody's saying, "Ruby Doris, so and so and so." And he's saying, "Look, we got to go." And she's saying, "Cliff, wait a minute . . . I got to take care of this." And him stalking off mad. And she saying, "Oh God . . . later for him, then." I imagine she caught hell when she got home.⁵¹

Thus, even though her marriage was important, there were times when Ruby Robinson refused to let anything—including marriage—interfere with her SNCC duties.

Clifford Robinson freely acknowledged how consumed Ruby Robinson was by her work in SNCC. It seemed that she never had any free time. Rather, according to Clifford, "it [SNCC work] was going on all the time around the house."⁵² In the midst of her responsibilities, however, there were instances when she made extraordinary efforts to plan activities with her SNCC friends that her husband enjoyed. Freddie Biddle clearly recalled that Ruby Robinson would often invite some of the people from the office to their house to play cards. She knew that Clifford enjoyed this and he would participate.

It is clear that there was more than one side to Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. Yet, those characteristics Robinson possessed that were most compatible with popular notions of proper female behavior were often submerged in the intensity of her work. Often, but not always. It would be misleading to try and fit Robinson's life into rigid categories. On the contrary, even in the office there were times when she displayed behavior that some might have considered contradictory to her tough leader image. Co-worker Dion Diamond had vivid recollections of such behavior:

Ruby used her femininity. . . . Ruby was aware that aside from all of these macho men that they were in many respects chauvinist . . . and I think she was aware that her being female that there was something that she could utilize in terms of that chauvinism—she could manipulate the chauvinism."⁵³

It seemed, then, that Robinson did not mind engaging in a little light-hearted bantering and mild flirtation of her own. Nevertheless, all agreed that she drew a line: she did not simper, she was not coquettish or coy.

Hence, given her personal characteristics, Robinson was quite comfortable in an assertive and commanding role, and she was equally comfortable with the other side of her personality. Even if people around her saw a contradiction between the various parts of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, she did not. At the same time, it seemed that she was annoyed by people who attempted to categorize her based on their own limited notions of proper female behavior. Matthew Jones, one of the SNCC Freedom Singers, talked about his perceptions and Robinson's reactions: "Ruby Doris wasn't the kind of woman that you'd say . . . can I talk to her. You never thought that way." She found such perceptions exasperating, Jones remembered, since she really wanted to be treated like a "regular human being."⁵⁴

Robinson's unconventional actions and demeanor were accompanied by attitudes that were a bit surprising and definitely unpredictable. For, despite her strength, her vision, and the reality of her life, Ruby Doris Robinson still embraced some very traditional attitudes about gender roles; and she was not alone. A chorus of strong black female voices echoed similar sentiments. For example, SNCC staffer Jennifer Lawson observed, "Often women might prefer *not* to lead, but there's a responsibility to black people at this time that must be met, and it overshadows this business of being a man or a woman."⁵⁵ Carolyn Rivers, a New Yorker working in the Alabama Black Belt, had no doubt that "if Negro men were able to assert themselves fully, they'd be willing to send all the women back home."⁵⁶ Rivers did not say whether she thought the women would be willing to go. Finally, Fannie Lou Hamer explained, "But as women, we feel we have done many things that have enabled us to open doors for our men and to show them that when they get their chance, we will be there to back them up all the way."⁵⁷

Like her activist sisters, Robinson also expressed views that were sympathetic to the peculiar trials suffered by African-American men in U.S. society. She believed that the crusade for racial justice was really men's work, after all. Since African-American men had been so victimized by U.S. society, however, they were not yet ready to shoulder the whole burden. Robinson insisted that "fortunately, more men are becoming involved with

the movement, and the day might come when women aren't needed for this type of work."⁵⁸ Because she was practical and realistic, though, Robinson realized that women would be in the movement for a long time: "But, I don't believe the Negro man will be able to assume his full role until the struggle has progressed to a point that can't even be foreseen—maybe in the next century or so."⁵⁹

Clearly these women, including Ruby Doris Robinson, were suggesting that in the future men, not women, would be *the* leaders of the movement. Women were leading, they insisted, because in the United States of the 1960s this was the most practical approach. On one hand, Robinson and the others could have been reacting to the exhaustion and frustration that came with trying to juggle their traditional female family responsibilities with their leadership commitments. On the other hand, however, this assessment could have been influenced by the increasingly popular notion that black men had somehow been more victimized than black women. Above all, race loyalty undoubtedly overshadowed gender issues in the minds of most African-American female civil rights activists of this era. They wanted to lead but they did not wish to assert themselves at the expense of their men. Such a position was fraught with contradictions.

As Robinson and her colleagues reflected on the issue of gender roles in the movement, their views were filtered through the growing male chauvinism that accompanied the rise of Black Power. One of the distinctive rallying cries of Black Power advocates was black male dominance. For so long, these advocates insisted, African-American men had been virtually emasculated by white society in the U.S. Thus, they must assume leadership roles and reclaim their masculinity as a prerequisite to the empowerment of African-American people. According to some men, they could only assume their rightful place if women would step aside and stop interfering. Such a negative notion of black female leadership was inextricably bound to a twisted assessment that blamed African-American women rather than white society for black male subordination.

Thus, increasingly, strong African-American women were subjected to negative assessments of their character and accomplishments from the black community as well as from the larger white society. Yet, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson refused to surrender to society's negative and limited expectations. She was an extremely complex woman who fought against the stereotypes. But, she had to have been affected by them. Any effort to assess Robinson's contribution to the movement, and the movement's effect on her, must necessarily recognize that part of her struggle was a continuing effort to hang on to her own sense of self in the face of pervasive and pernicious stereotypical images. Despite what anyone else thought or

expected, however, Ruby Doris Robinson acted in ways *she* defined as appropriate and did things *she* thought were important. If she had moments of hesitation or indecision, she did not let them stop her. Rather, she fulfilled the roles that were most important to her. She was a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and that was important to her. She was also a woman, a wife, and a mother, and that was also important to her. There were some who insisted that Ruby Doris Smith Robinson's refusal to limit her vision of her capabilities led to her premature death from cancer in 1967 at the age of 25:

... she died of exhaustion. ... I don't think it was necessary to assassinate her. What killed Ruby Doris was the constant outpouring of work, work, work, work with being married, having a child, the constant conflicts, the constant struggles that she was subjected to because she was a woman. ... She was destroyed by the movement.⁶⁰

NOTES

¹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America From the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 176.

⁶ Courtland Cox, interview with author, Washington, D.C., December 16, 1988.

⁷ Mukasa (Willie Ricks), interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., April 8, 1990.

⁸ Albert Brinson, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., November 10, 1990.

⁹ Mary Ann Wilson, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., November 19, 1989.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Catherine Robinson and Ruby O'Neal, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., March 3, 1990.

¹³ Phyl Garland, "Builders of a New South," *Ebony* 21 (August 1966): 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Roi Ottley, "What's Wrong with Negro Women?" *Negro Digest* 9 (December 1950): 73.

¹⁶ Lerone Bennett, "The Negro Woman," *Ebony* 16/17 (August 1960): 40.

¹⁷ The Atlanta University schools at that time included all-female Spelman College, all-male Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, Atlanta University, Clark College, and Gammon Theological Seminary.

¹⁸ Howard Zinn, "Finishing School for Pickets," *The Nation* (August 6, 1960), 73.

¹⁹ Robinson, like many African-American women, did not see the two sides of herself, debutante and activist, as contradictory. She was comfortable with both roles.

²⁰ Howard Zinn, *SNCC, The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 17-18.

²¹ Julian Bond, interview with author, Washington, D.C., December 16, 1988.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Benjamin Brown and Mary Ann Wilson, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., November 11, 1990.

²⁴ *The Atlanta Inquirer*, March 18, 1961.

²⁵ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 496.

²⁶ Julian Bond interview.

²⁷ James Bond, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., February 8, 1991.

²⁸ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 292.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cynthia Washington, "We Started From Different Ends of the Spectrum," *Southern Exposure* 5 (Winter 1977): 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Alvin Poussaint, "The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South," *Journal of American Psychiatry* 123 (October 1966): 403.

³³ Josephine Carson, *Silent Voices* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), 60.

³⁴ Zohara Simmons, interview with author, Philadelphia, Pa., December 17, 1988.

³⁵ Carson, *Silent Voices*, 160.

³⁶ Roi Ottley, "What's Wrong With Negro Women?" 75.

³⁷ Joyce Ladner, interview with author, Washington, D.C., December 18, 1988.

³⁸ Jack Minnis, interview with author, New Orleans, La., November 4, 1990.

³⁹ Mukasa interview.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and The Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 282.

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- ⁴¹ Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), interview with author, Knoxville, Tenn., March 14, 1990.
- ⁴² Mildred Forman, interview with author, Chicago, Ill., November 6, 1989.
- ⁴³ Stanley Wise, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., November 11, 1988.
- ⁴⁴ Bobbi Yancey, interview with author, New York, N.Y., May 16, 1991.
- ⁴⁵ Reginald Robinson and Charles Jones, interview with author, McComb, Miss., June 28, 1991.
- ⁴⁶ Mukasa interview.
- ⁴⁷ Dorie Ladner, interview with author, Washington, D.C., May 18, 1991.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Freddie Greene Biddle, interview with author, McComb, Miss., June 29, 1991.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Simmons interview.
- ⁵² Clifford Robinson, interview with author, Atlanta, Ga., March 17, 1989.
- ⁵³ Dion Diamond, interview with author, McComb, Miss., June 18, 1991.
- ⁵⁴ Matthew Jones, interview with author, Knoxville, Tenn., April 24, 1989.
- ⁵⁵ Garland, "Builders of a New South," 37.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 315.
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