

Social Networks within the Original Rainbow Coalition and Highlander Folk School:  
Solving Racism, Integration, Poverty, and Economic Inequality in Black and White

Past historians have written about interracial social networks during the Civil Rights Movement often credit the Rainbow Coalition in Chicago during 1969. These are groups of individuals who crossed racial lines and ethnicity to solve problems in black and white. In an article written in 2019 by Martha M. Arguello in the *Journal of African American Studies* titled “We Joined Others Who Were Poor: The Young Lords, the Black Freedom Struggle, and the ‘Original’ Rainbow Coalition,” the author notes that the Rainbow Coalition was conceived in 1969 by Bob Lee, Field Marshall of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, and Fred Hampton, Chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party (ILBPP).<sup>1</sup> This organization played a significant role in both the Civil Rights and Black Panther movement whose loyal support derived from poor white ethnic groups, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. Arguello argued that these groups comprised the country's largest population sector, they were consigned to a position of inferiority akin to a kind of colonial status, typically reserved for minorities in foreign lands.<sup>2</sup>

I met Bobbie Lee in Houston, Texas in 2012 in an interview conducted for a research project for the Houston History Magazine. Lee was responsible for the strong alliance with the Puerto Rican organization called the Young Lords (YLO).<sup>3</sup> When he was accepted to the Volunteer in Service to America program (VISTA) as a youth, crafted by President Lyndon B. Johnson, his first job assigned was at the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Chicago, Illinois,

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<sup>1</sup> Martha M. Arguello, “We Joined Others Who Were Poor: The Young Lords, the Black Freedom Struggle, and the ‘Original’ Rainbow Coalition,” *Journal of African American Studies* 23, no. 4 (2019): pp. 435-454, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-019-09453-7>.

<sup>2</sup> Martha M. Arguello.

<sup>3</sup> Martha M. Arguello.

1968. There, he mentored young teens, coached sports, chaperoned events, and organized youth programs. Lee noted in the interview that he interacted with gangs, such as the Young Lords at the YMCA because he rented rooms to their members when they became vacant. The commonality of economic inequality and racism allowed him to successfully communicate with them because of the respect they had for each other. Martha M. Arguello explores the emergence of young grassroots political organizations formed in inner cities such as the Young Lords Organization, the Black Panther Party, and the Brown Berets—all of which derived from communities of color. Chicago migrants consisted of a strong Latino population of Puerto Ricans, ethnic Mexicans, Cubans, and other Latin Americans, and between 1968 and 1969, they worked together to confront the atrocities of racism, police brutality, and poverty.

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, a premier of the First Rainbow Coalition aired on PBS. Ray Santisteban, a director, and film curator for twenty-six years highlights past footage of Bobbie Lee and the Black Panther Movement, the Young Lords Organization, and young working-class southern whites of the Young Patriots and noted, they “all banded together in one of the most segregated cities in postwar America to collectively confront issues...”<sup>4</sup> When authors assert terms like “the first” or “the original” in the context of the Rainbow coalition, it discredits the agency of those who participated in multicultural social networks in the South. Was the Rainbow Coalition in Chicago the first organization to cross racial barriers and band together in the mid twentieth century? So far, it has been the first multi-racial organization constructed by a black man. In his book, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander’s Vision for Social Justice*, author Stephen Preskill expressed that Myles Horton, activist, educator, and founder of Highlander Folk School (HFS), dreamed of creating a school that included everyone’s participation to change

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<sup>4</sup> *The First Rainbow Coalition* (PBS, 2020).

the social conditions in their lives, and posits—"it is the people, no matter what color, black or white where democracy truly lives." Horton was born in Savannah, Tennessee to Perry and Elsie Falls Horton. According to Ridley Wills II, an American historian and author from Nashville, Tennessee, they were both schoolteachers and sharecroppers.<sup>5</sup> Originally, HFS started in 1932 during the years of the Great Depression. They trained many leaders of the southern textile union under the banner of the Textile Workers Organization Committee.

In 1938, HFS planned a meeting in Birmingham to discuss prison reform, farm tenancy, women in the workforce, playgrounds facilities for blacks, abolition of the poll tax, and an end to race discrimination. Eleanor Roosevelt attended this meeting where the seating was segregated. According to Wills, the first lady disrupted segregated seating as she "conspicuously sat in between the aisles that separated blacks from whites."<sup>6</sup> In 1957, HFS became a center for labor training and Civil Rights leaders. A decade later, Martin Luther King's poor people's campaign in 1967 and 1968 was a plan to address the economic conditions of all races such as Mexican Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, and whites. This was a project crafted from the relationships that derived from the HFS, where founder Myles Horton alongside Guy Carawan were appointed to help King in his efforts to recruit whites.<sup>7</sup> Today, HFS is in Jefferson County, Tennessee and serves as a research and education center and for grassroots organizing and movement building. In November 2016, leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement chose the Highlander Research and Education Center as the site for an important organizational gathering.

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<sup>5</sup> Wills, Ridley. "Highlander Folk School, Grundy County's 'Public Nuisance.'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2007): 350–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42628030>.

<sup>6</sup> Wills, Ridley, 350–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42628030>.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 100.

Preskill noted, “they knew about Highlander’s relentless commitment to social justice and how they took the side of the disempowered.”<sup>8</sup>

Future research will prove that the first Rainbow Coalition was not born in Chicago, it was founded in Grundy, Tennessee at the educational institution, HFS in 1957. While it is important not to compete between the two organizations, it is imperative historians honor them both in academic scholarship within both the Civil Rights and Black Panther Movement. HFS was an integrated alternative educational institution that attracted loyal support from African American civil rights activists in the South. It garnered vicious condemnation by Commissioners of Education, law enforcement, white politicians, state legislatures, and racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. According to Stephen A. Schneider, author of *You Can’t Padlock an idea*, he identified Highlander educational programs as “rooted in and modeled on democratic principles, driven by and directed to immediate social and political ends.”<sup>9</sup> This is a study of the people we do not hear about, a story of activists and diverse politicians whose roots were grounded within diverse coalitions. The original rainbow coalition was indeed orchestrated the HFS that possibly influenced the TROC as a template for the streets of Chicago. Both organizations were shut down by constant local harassment from law enforcement, and violence from local hate groups within their communities.

In a HFS press release in 1957, King noted at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting, that “the institution’s commitment to social change and contribution to the South, helped produced some of

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Preskill, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's Vision for Social Justice* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen A. Schneider, *You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932-1961* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), location 45.

the most responsible leaders in this period of transition.”<sup>10</sup> These leaders were, but not limited to, Bernice Robinson, Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker. They influenced other women leaders like Diane Judith Nash who orchestrated a civil rights campaign in Nashville to integrate lunch counters. Nash also organized for the freedom riders and was the co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee founded by Ella Baker. Originally, HFS was an institution that fought white resistance and encouraged integration. Discourse of integrated coalitions of both race and gender that fought for social change is imperative to the historical analysis of racism, poverty, and economic inequality in America. More importantly, scholarship of women within the Civil Rights Movement should carry more weight as their male counterparts who make up the largest quantity of its past historiography.

If accepted to the Ph.D. program at the University of Texas at Arlington, the goal of my research is to explore the social networks of integrated institutions who crossed racial lines in concert with the women activists within these organizations. The Rainbow Coalition in the inner city of Chicago and Highlander Folk School, whose work contributed to Midwestern and Southern states both fought racism, poverty, police brutality and economic inequality. The study of HFS is inspired by the relationships of people who were willing to cross racial barriers. Furthermore, it is inspired by the women who studied at the institution and provoked change with their leadership skills which are often mistaken as mere organizational qualities. Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Diane Judith Nash, were the backbone of the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrated the resistance of oppression within their communities long before the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King and his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1957.

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<sup>10</sup> HRECR, WHi, Highlander Research and Education Center Records, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis., 807A, Tape 15.

The connection of Chicago civil rights activists and southern progressive states warrants special attention. Future research is also inspired by Robert E. Lee III, aka Bobbie Lee, Da Mayor of Fifth Ward, because this is where I first learned of the Rainbow Coalition. However, in our interview, Lee did not assert that it was the first multicultural organization during the Civil Rights Movement. The goal of this research is to further the discourse of cultural and political experiences shared by both the unknown voices of both young women and men from all races who came together and sought out resources to create social change. The Civil Rights and the Black Panther Movement are often perceived as polarized institutions in complete opposite from one another, however, the commonality they share was a raw emotion of dauntless courage that also deserves special attention.

More importantly, the silence of women activists in the Civil Rights Movement, who are deemed as apprentices under the auspices of male leadership faced the same discrimination they were fighting for from their male counterparts. It is imperative to debunk some past historical narratives of political movements and organizations as a homogenous one and humanize these movements for what they really were. Young people, from all races, both men and women, fought for social change as a collective in the 1960s. Malcolm X will later find in his voyage to Mecca and conclude that white people were not the problem, they were not evil. He changed his mind on separatism and devoted the rest of his life to seek a true brotherhood from all races.

My journey at the University of Texas at Arlington was diverse in subjects. I believe it is important to learn as much as you can and take advantage of the opportunity for experts to pour into you. Approaching graduation this year has inspired me to dig deeper in positive aspects of race relations in the United States. Future research I aspire to conduct is an interracial study on

race, class, and gender within various social networks. Moreover, it will examine the importance of multicultural institutions such as TROC and HFS, who together worked, strategized, bonded, agreed, and disagreed with one another to challenge the political vision of American laws and values in the mid twentieth century.

