

Mapping Relationships in the Mississippi Freedom Movement

Introduction

In this project, I attempted to build on a database I made of organizers, organizations, and campaigns that were part of the Mississippi Freedom Moment. The information in the original database was found Akinyele Umoja's in *We Will Shoot Back*, a history focused on the role of armed resistance and armed self-defense in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle.¹ This text is seminal in combating the dominant narrative of civil rights and black power ideology which organizations like COFO, and CORE as carrying out most of the work before the 1970s through non-violence alone and paramilitary groups emerging on the fringe just when the movement was fizzling out.² Instead, *We Will Shoot Back*, present a history of black resistance and organizing in Mississippi that centers the people and communities that used armed-defense and armed resistance to create safe havens throughout the state well before members of SNCC and CORE arrived in the early 1960s. Umoja writes:

[A]rmed resistance was critical to the efficacy of the southern freedom struggle and the dismantling of segregation and Black disenfranchisement. Intimidation by White supremacists was intended to bring fear to the Black population and its allies and sympathizers in the White community. To overcome the legal system of apartheid, Black people had to overcome fear to present a significant challenge to White domination. Armed self-defense had been a major tool of survival in allowing some Black southern communities to maintain their integrity and existence in the face of White supremacist terror [...] *We Will Shoot Back* argues that without armed resistance, primarily organized by local people, the National Association for the

¹ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (NYU Press, 2013).

² "Civil Rights Movement: An Overview | Scholastic," accessed December 17, 2017, <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/civil-rights-movement-overview/>; "Civil Rights Movement - Black History," HISTORY.com, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>; "American Civil Rights Movement | Definition, Events, History, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 17, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement>. A particularly good example of this appears in the Encyclopedia Britannica's entry for "American Civil Rights Movement": "Although the passage in 1964 and 1965 of major civil rights legislation was victorious for the movement, by then militant black activists had begun to see their struggle as a freedom or liberation movement not just seeking civil rights reforms but instead confronting the enduring economic, political, and cultural consequences of past racial oppression."

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists would not have been able to organize in Mississippi.³

My goal is to use DH methods to explore the interconnections in membership between civil rights groups, paramilitary groups, and black liberation organizations in Mississippi between 1960 and 1970. My aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the roles each played in the movement. To do this, I attempted to visualize membership across major organizations involved in the struggle into a network.

Methodology

Throughout my project, I thought regularly about how I could best express connections between events, people and organizations in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle.⁴ I chose to create a network because I am most interested in exploring the relationships between people and the ways these connections built power within the Mississippi Freedom Struggle. In *Demystifying Networks, Parts I & II*, Scott Weingart writes that networks are ideal to use when “the objects of this study are interdependent rather than independent. Representing information as a network implicitly suggests not only that connections matter, but that they are required to understand whatever’s going on.”⁵ In making my network, I took the following steps:

1. Collect data
2. Identify relationships (nodes and edges)
3. Select network software
4. Visualize Network

Collecting the data was the most time consuming part of this process. While I had data in a database I had previously built, the data felt lacking and focused exclusively on the most well-known people in the movement. I turned instead to the index of *We Will Shoot Back* where I found over 300 names listed and decided to build on my original dataset. My plan was to use the names and their associated subterms to map relationships. I quickly became worried about pulling names without understanding

³ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

⁴ To prepare, I reviewed the 230 projects listed in The Colored Conventions Project’s Black DH Project and Resource Guide. Colored Conventions Project, “Black Digital Humanities Projects & Resources,” Google Docs, accessed December 17, 2017, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rZwucjyAAR7QiEZl238_hhRPXo5-UKXt2_KCwPZkiQ/edit?pli=1&usp=embed_facebook.

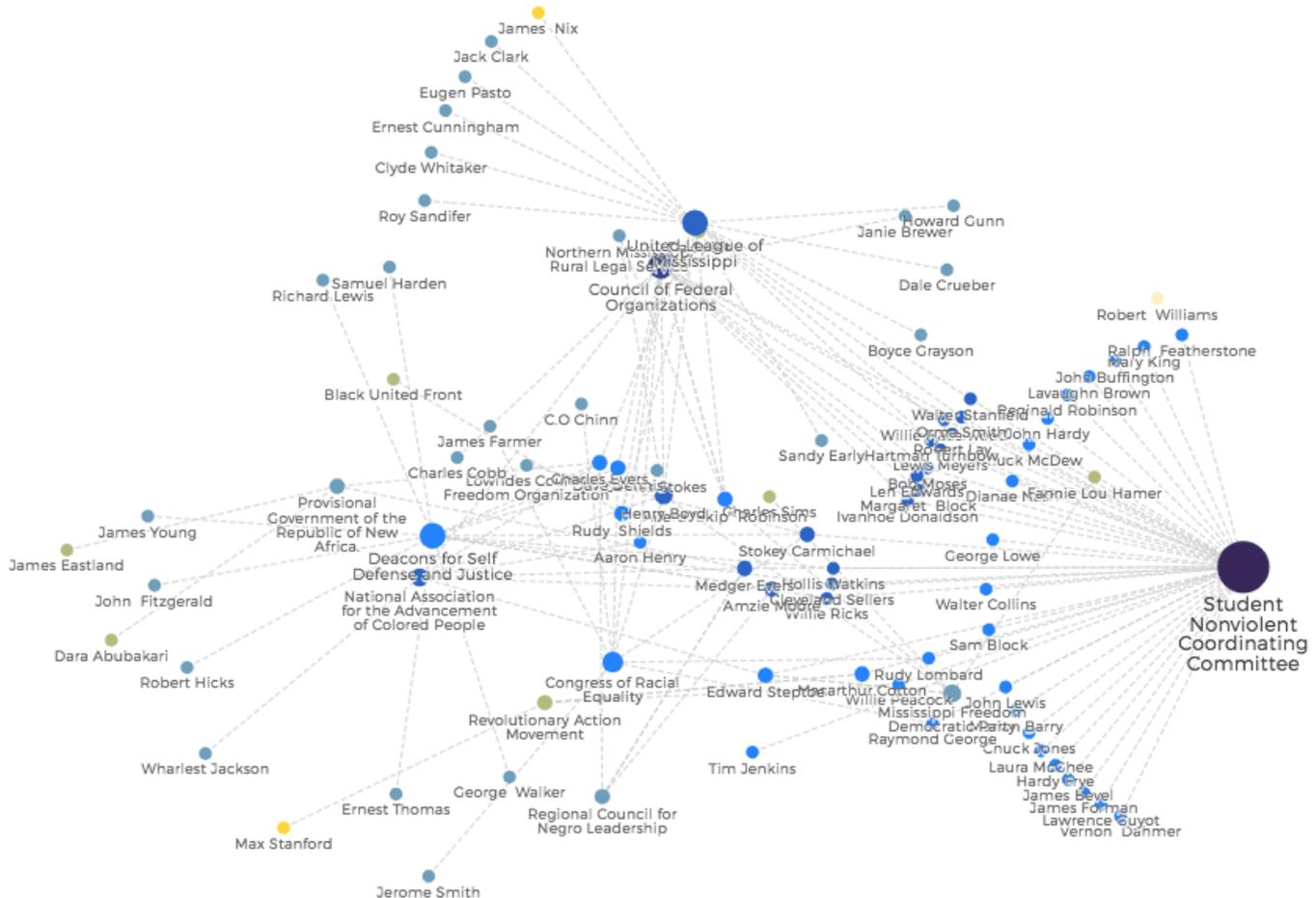
⁵ Scott B. Weingart, “Demystifying Networks, Parts I & II,” March 15, 2012, <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/demystifying-networks-by-scott-weingart/>.

who someone was. Some names in the index belonged to members of the KKK, the White Citizens Council, and/or politicians who worked in opposition to the group. For this reason, it was necessary to look up any name used in the network.

To limit the scope of my data, I chose to include only those people who had been given subentries; this way my data would reflect the connections emphasized by Umoja. I categorized the organizations by terms also found in the index: organization, paramilitary, black liberation, and civil rights. I manually entered these into a SQL database and attempted to upload my network to Gephi. I struggled to import my data without crashing the program.

Instead I used a free web based program called [Onodo](#) a new open source tool that aims to facilitate network mapping and effective storytelling around relational information. Figure 2 shows a screen shot of the finish product; an interactive version can be accessed [here](#).

Figure 2 Network of Relationships in We Will Shoot Back



Results

In looking at the final network, Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee(SNCC), Council of Federal Organizations(COFO), The United League of Mississippi(UL) and the Deacons for Self Defense and Justice have the most connections on this map. The presence of a civil rights organization (SNCC), a civil rights coalition (COFO), a black liberation organizations (UL) and a local paramilitary organization (the Deacons) support Umoja’s claim that the work of civil rights organizations in Mississippi was deeply tied to local and militant community organizations. The overlap in membership further illustrates that not only did these groups collaborate, many people participated in both.

The network also sheds light on the relationship between Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee(SNCC) and the Deacons for Self Defense. When SNCC began organizing in Mississippi in the early 1960, the national office connected field organizers to Amzie Moore, a well know organizer and a member of the Deacons for Self Defense in Mississippi. Thus from their arrival in Mississippi, members of these groups collaborated on campaigns. The Deacons regularly supports organizers from national civil rights organizations in their early work in Mississippi. The NAACP hired the Deacons for Self Defense to act as enforcers during a series of boycotts throughout the state. Umoj explains that the Deacons for Defense and their “open advocacy of armed resistance” incited “the development of paramilitary organization [...] parallel to the emphasis on consumer boycotts as a method to coerce local White power structures to concede to demands of the Movement.”⁶ Their prowess on this network map may support the claim that the Deacon’s “open advocacy of armed resistance” during boycotts influenced SNCC’s use of boycotts in Mississippi and shift away towards Black Power ideology.

NODE	TYPE	DESCRIPTION	VISIBLE	IMAGE	CLUSTERS	CONNECTIONS	RELEVANCE	BETWEENNESS	CLOSENESS	CORENESS
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee	Civil Rights	+			4.00	43.00	1.00	2544.87	0.53	3.00
Council of Federal Organizations	Civil Rights	+			6.00	17.00	0.50	9137.9	0.46	3.00
United League of Mississippi	Black Liberation	+			5.00	16.00	0.19	839.04	0.38	3.00
Deacons for Self Defense and Justice	Paramilitary	+			8.00	15.00	0.18	7495.5	0.37	3.00

Finally, the network shows the importance of individual people to this movement; many of them being local activists: the two with the most connections being Henry Boyd Jr. and Amzie Moore. Amzie Moore is one of the most influential and well known activists in the movement: Amzie Moore brought SNCC into Mississippi; in fact, he put voter

⁶ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

registration on SNCC's table. SNCC field organizer, Bob Moses who first met Moore during a 1960 Mississippi trip remembered years later, "Amzie was the only one I met on that trip giving the student sit-in movement careful attention, aware of all that student energy and trying to figure out how to use it."⁷ The SNCC Digital Gateway project, a collaborative project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC—pronounced "Snick") Legacy Project, Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, and Duke University Libraries, describes Amzie's path to activism and the deep influence he had on the movement.

Moore was born on September 23, 1911, in Grenada County, Mississippi. The family sharecropped and grew vegetables to stretch their furnish—the ten dollars a month they borrowed from the landlord to live on. His mother died when he was fourteen-years-old, leaving him to fend for himself. He went as far as the tenth grade in school—the highest grade offered at his high school. He started working at the post office in 1935 and used his solid income to build a house, becoming the first Black person in Bolivar County to receive a federal home loan.

Moore helped found the Regional Council of Negro Leadership in 1951 and became president of the local branch of the NAACP. In 1954, he opened a combination service-station and cafe in Cleveland. "When I got through with it, people came; white people, black people, everybody came," he remembered. For refusing to put a "colored only" sign up, local whites cut off his access to credit. He kept his brick home well-armed and at night, brightly lit with floodlights.

Moore taught the SNCC field workers what they could not learn at their universities or workshops: how to move in, out, and around rural communities effectively. He plugged organizers into his network. In 1962, Moore took Bob Moses and Dorie Ladner over to Charleston, Mississippi to recruit Willie Peacock, a student at Rust College to join SNCC's voter registration drive. Moore and Peacock's father both belonged to the Prince Hall Masons, and "my father was pretty happy about it," Peacock remembered. "They were Master Masons and they were giving signs, and they were [...] just having a good time about it." Moore got SNCC workers Charles McLaurin, Charlie Cobb, and Landy McNair, started with their voter registration project by introducing them at a Ruleville church service one Sunday morning in 1962. Deepening these networks, the SNCC workers trudged up and down dirt roads, sat on porches, went to church, walked into cotton fields, and helped with daily chores.⁸

Henry Boyd Jr. was a also well known local activist in Mississippi. Here Umoja describes how Boyd and his organizing partner "Skip" Robinson founded the United League, one

⁷ Charles E. Cobb Jr, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, Reprint edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

⁸ "Amzie Moore," *SNCC Digital Gateway* (blog), accessed December 18, 2017, <https://snccdigital.org/people/amzie-moore/>.

of the most effect organizations in the Mississippi movement and ran almost entirely by local activists who advocated for armed resistance:

Two of the local activists who were drawn into the COFO and FDP activity in the county were Henry Boyd Jr. and Alfred "Skip" Robinson, both of whom emerged as leaders of the local Movement in the late 1960s. Boyd had participated in Movement activity as a college student at Rust College in the early 1960s. Like his parents, he worked in the Holly Springs public schools immediately after graduating from Rust in 1962. Robinson was a local brick mason and contractor from Red Banks, a small Marshall County farming community. Robinson joined the Movement in 1960 after he met Medgar Evers in Jackson. Both Boyd and Robinson participated in the local Movement under the general leadership of elders in their community. Robinson's home in rural Marshall County was firebombed in 1965. He believed his home was bombed by White supremacists due to his political activity. Boyd and Robinson both participated in the local NAACP, the FDP, and the Marshall County Citizens for Progress, which was headed by local minister A. G. Pegues. Both Robinson and Boyd were active members of the Citizens for Progress, which organized a boycott of downtown Holly Springs in 1966.⁹ Robinson and Boyd were recognized as the central organizers in Marshall County by 1967, as S. T. Nero, Pegues, and other elder activists "passed the torch" to younger, more militant Movement advocates. Robinson and Boyd sought to unite the various human rights formations in the county, including the NAACP, the FDP, and Citizens for Progress. Unlike the FDP or the NAACP, the Citizens for Progress organization was not a local affiliate of a state or national group. Citizens for Progress was renamed the United League of Marshall County. All the county's local civil rights groupings were united under the umbrella of the United League (UL). Robinson served as the UL president and Boyd as the executive secretary; they coordinated Marshall County Civil Rights Movement activity in the UL headquarters in Holly Springs.⁹

Both Amzie Moore and Henry Boyd Jr were local activists who had learned to use armed resistance and self-defense to present a significant challenge to White supremacists in their communities. The number of connections held in this network by Amzie Moore and Henry Boyd Jr. revile those of entire organizations like the NAACP, and CORE. It becomes clear that the movement relied on the participation and guidance of specific people for direction, safety, and impact.

Conclusion: Future Work

While this network revealed insights into relationships in the Mississippi Freedom Movement there are many ways it could be built on and improved. First, future research could grow this study by noting specific roles people played within organizations on the

⁹ Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

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map. My network did not seem to adequately categorize the relationships people had to organizations in any more depth than that they were members. This could reveal new kinds of connections and trends if people were categorized by the role they played i.e. community partners, advisors, organizers, founding members, chapter head, national leadership, etc. It may be particularly enlightening to highlight which activists were local leaders and which were field organizers sent by a national organization.

In the same way, this analysis could benefit from a closer attention to the way membership shifted over time. If data was added to indicate when an activist joined an organization and when an they left, one could develop a better understanding of the kinds of ways people participated in different groups: were activists members of multiple groups at one time? Was there a shift away from a certain ideology and towards another?

Last, this experiment would benefit from growing the dataset to include members of these organizations who aren't mentioned in *We Will Shoot Back*. While working on this, I stumbled upon the [Civil Rights Movement Veteran's Website](#), an amazing collection of narratives, documents, and resources about the Southern Freedom Movement created by people who participated in the movement itself. The Civil Rights Movement Veteran's website hosts a page called 'Civil Rights Roll Call'. Here people have elected to share their stories about participating in the Mississippi Freedom Movement, note the groups they were involved in and the dates of their involvement. There is a wealth of information in these stories and they offer a much richer picture of the organizing and relationships in the movement.