

Preface

O, yes, I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!
—Langston Hughes

The intended audience of this book are “practitioners in a system of education that does not yet exist,” as Dr. Vincent Harding called us. We are citizens in an America that is yet to become. We are trying to imagine and create a way to educate our children for democracy, but must do this in an America that does not yet know the practice of democracy.

The ideas presented here for creating this new system of education derive from the teaching of Robert Parris Moses, Mississippi field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s and founder of the Algebra Project. The work of the Algebra Project is to help young people “fashion an insurgency” in the country’s educational arrangements, one that will complement the insurgencies in public accommodations and voting rights of the Civil Rights Movement.

My first encounter with this body of work came during a two-week seminar in the summer of 1995 led by Maisha Moses, Bob Moses’s daughter, and by Lynn Godfrey, who more than a decade earlier had been Maisha’s math teacher in middle school. And their seminar—extending this genealogy—began with a study of

Ella Baker, Bob Moses's teacher, through the reading of an article called, "Organizing in the Spirit of Ella."¹

Central to Miss Baker's spirit was her insistence that "radical" organizing must get down to the root causes of things. "We not only must *remember* where we have been," she said, "but we must also *understand* where we have been." For almost two decades I have wondered about the difference between "remembering" and "understanding" in Miss Baker's terms.

One of the differences is that you can "remember" something that you have read in a book or that you have been told, but can only "understand" something that you have dwelt with: talked over, questioned, argued about, thought through, practiced, applied, worked out, acted out, done. The act of understanding, necessarily oral and physical to some extent, never ends. Deeper and deeper and deeper, the same knowledge or "information" burrows and tunnels and seeps into and saturates the soil of your being, till everything you "knew" looks different as you talk with people and do things with them, trying to understand.

In addition to following the thinking and practice of Bob Moses, I have tried to imitate the methods of the philosopher and critic Kenneth Burke. Burke's crucial influence on Ralph Ellison has been a growing topic of scholarly investigation.² But I first came in contact with Burke through his studies of rhetoric and poetry. He urges us to think about writing as "symbolic action," that

1 Robert P. Moses et al, "The Algebra Project: Organizing in the Spirit of Ella," *Harvard Educational Review* 59/4 (November 1989).

2 See, for example, Bryan Crable, *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

is, a poem or book *does something* that the writer needs done. Burke's theory of dramatism interprets all human relations as dramatic in form, where we, the players, do things, and react to each other's doing, and come to understand more and more about our roles as we work out our relations with other people and with the world. The parallels and similarities between Burke's dramatism and Moses's Algebra Project are striking and each throws light on the other.

Underlying my argument throughout is the idea that wherever we live or work may be thought of as a self-healing place. "Put down your bucket where you are," Booker T. Washington explained in *Up From Slavery*. And as Dr. Harding taught, the entire history of humankind leads to right here and right now, wherever we find ourselves; and from here and now, constrained but not determined by the past, we are obligated to imagine and create a future that could restore the innocence of the first day.

Keeping the child's innocence before the mind's eye is useful in this regard. So, too, is a saying that Bob Moses quotes. He came upon it on the gravestone of Kingman Brewster, president of Yale University in the 1960s. Brewster's epitaph reads: "The presumption of innocence is not only a legal concept; in common law and in common sense, it requires a generosity of spirit toward the stranger, the expectation of what is best, rather than what is worst, in the other."

The creation of a system of education to foster a true democracy will be founded on this principle. Again and again in my daily work as a teacher in Baltimore, this question of the presumption of innocence is raised. It is raised by the young people; it is raised by their parents; it

is raised by the police, the psychologists, the social workers; it is raised by students wondering if they are safe in the cafeteria, and by teachers wondering whether they will lose their jobs.

In our country, slaves were presumed guilty from the first day. Young people in poverty now are also presumed guilty in many contexts—treated with suspicion, aversion, alarm, and contempt. The question we explore is not whether there is justification in reality for these stances. The question, rather, is what stance we should take toward the young descendants of slaves and their peers in poverty if we and they presume their innocence, the only civilized presumption.

We practice taking stances today that will only be fully appropriate in a future America. There are risks involved in such a practice. Nevertheless, beauty and partial justice may result, even before the birth of a new world.