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Articles

Maria Varela's Flickering Light: Literacy, Filmstrips, and the Work of Adult Literacy Education in the Civil Rights Movement

Michael Dimmick

Abstract

In this article, I take up the underrecognized and almost unstudied literacy work of Maria Varela, a Latinx Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff member in charge of developing literacy materials for African Americans in the South during the 1960s. I analyze the use of community activism in the multimodal literacy materials that Varela and African American communities collaboratively produced. These filmstrips played a critical role in those communities developing a new ethos of place: an imagined and embodied relationship between local and national communities that offers a new identity, sense of participatory agency, and place from which to speak.

In this article, I take up the adult education practices evident in the underrecognized and almost unstudied literacy work of Maria Varela, a Latinx Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff member in charge of developing literacy materials for African Americans in the South during the 1960s. Studying the integration of voice, text, and image in the filmstrips Varela composed for literacy programming complements and expands existing scholarship on adult literacy education practices in the Civil Rights Movement. I argue that the literacy materials Varela and African American communities collaboratively produced played a critical role in those communities developing a new ethos of place: an imagined and embodied relationship between local and national communities that offers a new identity, sense of participatory agency, and place from which to speak.

As a member of SNCC's Selma Literacy Project in 1964, Varela hoped to develop "literacy materials out of the experience, needs and aspirations of adult" African Americans in Selma, Alabama (Varela, Goals 1). The express goal of the Selma Literacy Project was to not only develop literacy and citizenship, but to use literacy education as a means for cultivating agency by fostering critical self-reflection, engendering confidence, responding to histories of racism, and promoting sustainable modes of learning within the community itself. Later, in 1966, Varela's refined pedagogical goals are evident in a request for funds to develop new literacy materials—filmstrips—useful for integrating literacy education with communities' desire to organize for social and civic change. Filmstrips such as *If You Farm You Can Vote*, which tells the story of a Mississippi community organizing to vote in an upcoming Agricultural Stabili-

zation and Conservation Service (ASCS) committee election, broke down complicated civil procedures into actionable instruction. Varela argues that by incorporating images of community members, text, and audio recordings of community members explaining what needs to be done, the filmstrips would not only show familiar community members acting for change but draw on the experiential knowledge and rhetorical traditions favored by the community. In doing so, the filmstrips demystified civic discourse, redefined the space of the margin, and offered new models of collective leadership. Using filmstrips in combination with text and audio, the farmers in this community effectively crafted new literacy practices to both shape the dispositions of an ethos of place and to achieve the goals of their community.

After tracing Varela's emergence as an activist in her biography, I contextualize her community work with a brief comparison with the Citizenship School literacy program to highlight the contribution Varela's literacy work makes to our history of adult literacy education in the Civil Rights Movement. To ground my discussion of the role of literacy materials in shaping a new ethos of place for African American communities, I read Michael J. Hyde's retheorization of ethos as a dwelling place alongside bell hooks' discussion of home places as sites for radically envisioning the margin as a source of power. I argue that Varela makes use of the importance of place in literacy materials for developing ethos. I then turn to a close reading of the exclusionary representations of place and tropes of whiteness in literacy primers available to Varela at the time, noting how the hidden curriculum denies African American learners a place in the nation. I follow this with a discussion of the filmstrips Varela collaboratively produced with the community to be used for literacy programming, focusing my analysis on *If You Farm You Can Vote*. By combining the use of local community members' voices and dialect in narrative traditions of testimony with images of community spaces and community members as agents acting to change the conditions of their lives, the filmstrips illustrate the role of multimodal literacy materials in shaping community ethos and developing activist dispositions.

Maria Varela's Emergence as an Activist: Observation, Reflection, Action

Varela was born in Pennsylvania, but her family would eventually settle in the Midwest. Varela attended a Catholic High School where she joined Young Christian Students (YCS). After graduating high school, Varela continued her work with the YCS organization at Alverno, a Franciscan college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At that time, Varela recalls, the Catholic church was deeply informed by "the sense that social engagement was the core of the religion," particularly, "the social inquiry movement" guided by Leo the Thirteenth's encyclical "which said society has to be restructured for justice" (Varela, "Oral History" 5–6). Varela's training for social action by YCS taught her a critical process of community listening that would inform her work with SNCC and her subsequent social justice work. YCS trained members in social action guided by the premise that social change began with a process of observation, reflection, and action. "Cause you're supposed to look at your milieu," Varela says, "and what are the barriers there to people loving each other, or to people not feeling os-

tracized or bullied” (7). As student body president at Alverno, she attended the National Student Association (NSA) Congress and met SNCC members who were there to argue for NSA support of the sit-in movement. After college, as a member of the national YCS staff, she was invited to attend the Students for a Democratic Society’s Port Huron Conference where she developed friendships with SNCC members in attendance. As a member of the national YCS staff, Varela visited Catholic colleges to encourage students’ engagement with the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1963, she was invited down to work in SNCC’s Atlanta field office, where she was then asked to go to Selma, Alabama, to head the Selma Literacy Project working with a Catholic pastor of an African American parish. Varela, however, had no experience with literacy instruction, and after surveying existing literacy materials she came to feel that the materials were insulting to the literacy skills African American adults did have. After the Selma Literacy Program ended in 1964, Varela continued her adult literacy work for SNCC in Mississippi, where she also trained as a photographer to document SNCC actions and to produce images she felt would be useful for developing literacy materials. In 1967 when support for her programming ended, she moved to New Mexico—where she still lives today. There she joined the Land Grant Movement headed by Reies Tijerina and worked for the Chicano Press Association. In 1983, she would help found Ganados del Valle, a community organization serving local Chicano and Native American communities. Ganados del Valle would play a significant role in preserving a tradition of raising a nearly extinct breed of long hair sheep, Churro sheep, used by Navajo and Chicano weavers. During the 1980s, she helped the community establish a wool growers’ cooperative and several related businesses. Varela would go on to be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1990 for her work with Ganados del Valle and the community.

There is little scholarship focusing on Varela, though she is mentioned in several instances as part of a larger portrait of SNCC. Varela is mentioned in passing in Daniel Pearlstein’s “Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools” as part of a larger overview of SNCC’s education initiatives in the South. In “‘Come Let Us Build a New World Together’: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement,” Leigh Raiford discusses one of Varela’s photographs, noting that Varela turned her lens to focus on local leaders and individuals. In *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, Raiford includes a brief discussion of Varela’s use of photographs in creating the filmstrips. In this discussion she notes that their focus on individual community members encouraged a reflection on the state of affairs in the community.

More recently, Varela has received increased public attention for her work in SNCC. When I interviewed her in 2009, she had contributed an essay, “Time to Get Ready,” for an upcoming collection, *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, which would be published in 2010. In 2011, she was one of nine Civil Rights Movement activists featured in the exhibition, *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement*, which would go on to travel nationally, most recently opening in February 2020 in Austin, Texas. In 2017, her photos of the Black and Brown movements of the 1960s were also selected by the National Muse-

um of Mexican Art for a solo show, *Roots of My Resistance*, that is now traveling the country. Varela has also contributed to Duke University's online resource, *SNCC: Digital Gateway*. The increased attention to Varela's work has led to new opportunities for lecturing, interviews, and participation in the Library of Congress's ongoing Civil Rights History Project. Despite this increased attention, Varela's literacy work and role as a critical pedagogue remains unstudied, and much of the publicity has focused on Varela as a photographer.

During Varela's tenure with SNCC working in Selma, Alabama, and disparate communities in Mississippi, Varela developed an intuitive, organic approach to literacy education. In 1965, at an organizing meeting in Mississippi, she began listening to attendees asking each other questions: "How did you get your loan for farm equipment?"; "How much does it cost to get a (co-op) charter?" (Varela, "Report" 3). By listening to people explain the answers, she realized that "the text for these materials should be written by the people themselves" (Varela, "Report" 3). Beginning by developing literacy primers that built on adults' existing literacy skills and facility with language, she began utilizing local people's recorded speech and African American history as the narrative for the materials. In Mississippi, she extended her efforts to feature local concerns and rhetorical traditions by working with communities to produce filmstrips integrating text, images of local spaces and people, and recorded audio of local people demystifying the literate practices needed to participate more fully in the social, civic, and public life of the community. A study of Varela's work adds to the scholarship in recent years by Kates, Lathan, Levine, Schneider, and Feigenbaum focusing on the Citizenship Schools program, perhaps the most notable adult literacy education campaign during the Civil Rights Movement. Where the Citizenship Schools literacy programming focused on civic practices, Varela developed a literacy program that integrated literacy education with specific step-by-step strategies to launch economic and political ventures that local people employed to better their economic status.

Literacy and Activism: The Citizenship Schools and Varela's New Approach

Founded on Johns Island, South Carolina, in 1957, the Citizenship Schools quickly spread throughout the Sea Islands, and ultimately across the deep South. While literacy education in the Civil Rights Movement is often tied to voter registration initiatives, for the participants in the Citizenship Schools, literacy, education, and literate practices were seen as a direct path for transforming the means and modes of navigating personal, communal, and civic life in their immediate communities and the broader American public. Central to that transformation was the development of place-based literacy materials that provided learners a rhetorical education in social, economic, political, and civic spheres.

These literacy materials—initially named "My Reading Booklet" and later changed to "My Citizenship Booklet"—balanced a practical education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, with the concerns of civic, personal, and political life. By in-

tegrating sample voter registration tests, instructing learners in how to address politicians in letter writing, and incorporating sentence-building exercises that linked the alphabet to vocabulary of civic life (J for Justice, etc.), citizenship booklets used practical exercises to cultivate the use of literacy in a political context. Likewise, the math lessons were tied to developing financial literacy in making personal decisions (buying pantyhose for example), preparing learners to better manage their computational work in market occasions (calculating how many bales of cotton a farmer transported over four days), as well as specifically referencing political activism (how many people the Crusade for Veterans registered to vote in three months).

The Citizenship Schools' booklets directly linked a practical education to participating in movement activism and gaining sovereignty over individuals' economic life. Susan Kates' observation of the materials' "idealized view of literacy as a tool for social progress and transformation"(494) echoes Rhea Lathan's synthesis of literacy education in the Citizenship Schools: "They were an empowering force against the dehumanizing strain of segregationist ideologies, guiding many participants into activism" ("Freedom Writing" xiii). As the name suggests—"My Citizenship Booklet"—the literacy materials addressed not only the practical exigence of voter registration, but also emphasized a broad education in the habits and practices of citizenship.

Like the Citizenship Schools, Varela designed a literacy program based on the expressed needs of the communities she worked with, integrated literacy and activism, and sought to provide the literacy practices necessary for community members to live, as she says, "a fully human life" (Varela, "Goals" 1). Unlike the Citizenship Schools, Varela designed a literacy program where the materials showed the experience of actual communities working to change their lives. Seeing other communities' successful efforts for justice, Varela felt, empowered audience members and developed a sense of pride that would motivate them "to continue dismantling apartheid in the southern Black Belt" (Varela, "Part Three"). The collaboratively-produced filmstrips used for literacy education were instrumental to the community developing a new ethos of place.

Ethos: Dwelling Places in the Margin

My focus on ethos raises the question of where ethos emerges and how. To understand the development of an ethos that addresses a history of racism structuring the South, I draw on Hyde's retheorization of ethos, which accounts for the places, activities, linguistic resources, knowledge, and traditions of the local communities out of which the habits and dispositions of ethos emerge. The rhetorical tradition has stripped ethos of its relationship to space and acting, focusing instead on a solitary rhetor's ability to perform, demonstrate, or embody an ethical character, which hardly seems useful for understanding how a community denied ethos can come to develop a means for speaking back to the systemic racism constraining the possibility of everyday and public life. Drawing on Martin Heidegger, Hyde's tracing the etymology of ethos back to "dwelling," "habits," and "haunts" restores a spatial perspective to the simplified conception of ethos as an ethical character appeal. For Aristotle,

ethos was produced by the speaker during delivery. Cicero more explicitly points to the life of the community as grounds for ethos. By the time Quintilian defines rhetoric as “a good man speaking well,” though, the relationship between ethical character, place, knowledge, and community opinion (doxa) seem effectively severed. The transformation of ethos from a malleable means of persuasion a speaker produces, to the record of “accomplishments” a person carries into a rhetorical situation, to a moral or ethical disposition a person must possess to be “a good man speaking well” has left us with an inheritance of ethos as individual trait, ethical character. In contrast, Hyde connects the ethical back to a way of dwelling in the world. He writes, “one can understand the phrase ‘the ethos of rhetoric’ to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ (ethos; pl. ethea) where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’ (con-scientia) some matter of interest. Such dwelling places define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop” (Hyde xiii). In a 2009 interview, Varela recalled Ella Baker’s suggestion that SNCC organizers “should be listening to what she called the semi-public discourse of resistance, that which you might find in barber shops, family get-togethers, things like that, where she said you could determine what people that were in resistance were against and maybe how far they would go” (“Personal Interview”). Barber shops, churches, and living rooms have often served as “hush harbor sites” in the African American community (Nunley). These local sites of activism where African American language traditions were celebrated and community members developed resistance to the overdetermined hegemony of a dominant white culture played a critical role in shaping a community ethos.

For the communities of farmers marginalized socially, physically, economically, and politically, an attention to the social spaces of those communities helps to reframe the simplifying binary conceptions of margin and center that structure the public ethos available to African Americans. Situated as the other of southern ethos, African Americans are positioned to maintain the structure of southern society, effectively living within and outside of that social space. African Americans are critical to how the South is imagined and lived but constrained from participating in public discourse. At the same time, there is a lengthy tradition of African Americans, individuals and communities, using literacy in a variety of ways to subvert, reimagine, and invent the ethos needed to be heard (Logan; Royster; Enoch; Levine; hooks; Nunley; Lathan *Freedom Writing*; Gilyard; Campbell; Richardson; Smitherman “African-American English”).

In her collection *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks offers another way of theorizing marginalized sites and subjectivities that extends Hyde’s discussion of ethos by theorizing margins as “spaces of radical openness” (148). She writes of the choice to take up the margin, not as “a marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (149–150). Within the margin, “homeplaces” are sites “where we could restore to our-selves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public space”

(42). In hooks' testimony, a network of everyday spaces helps cultivate an ethos that subverts the subjugated position articulated by a dominant order.

Making use of the importance of African American "homeplaces" to fostering a restorative ethos, Varela's literacy artifacts place us inside local spaces where African American communities invent new literacy practices and new spaces out of the materials and sites of everyday life. In doing so, she calls attention to the importance of re-seeing these sites, not as sites of passive subjugation, but as rich resources for developing the ethos necessary to build a new vision of the world. The literacy materials (filmstrips) Varela developed with the communities illuminate the role of literacy and literacy materials in building an ethos of place.

Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum of Literacy Materials

Varela had no experience in adult literacy education, so in the lead up to the Selma Literacy Project, she began researching adult literacy materials. "Within a very short time," she writes, "I realized those materials would only make the problem worse. Written by white authors about white life, they were framed in simplistic, childish wording" ("Time" 569). Catherine Prendergast writes that "literacy has been managed and controlled in myriad ways to rationalize and ensure White domination" (2). Of these means, perhaps the most visible examples have been the legal decisions prohibiting literacy education for slaves and, as the Civil Rights Movement brought to greater attention, the use of literacy tests as a means for widespread voter disenfranchisement. However, the literacy materials Varela discusses reveal another way in which literacy education is intricately connected to normalizing and maintaining, "[rationalizing] and [ensuring] white domination." Varela critiques the hidden curriculum of materials available for adult literacy education, noting that "the materials which exist are inadequate and insult the dignity and style of life of the black-belt Negro community" ("Goals" 2). Jane Martin argues that "a hidden curriculum is always *of* some setting," and is "*at* some time" (emphasis in original 125). Not surprisingly, the adult literacy primers available in the early 1960s reflect many of the dominant values, attitudes, and social relationships organizing life in America. For example, the language used for literacy education reflects the Standard American English of the time—what Smitherman calls, more appropriately, "the language of wider communication" ("African-American English" 22). Likewise, the images these primers used to illustrate language use in context draw from the life of white, middle and upper class daily life, and the content reflects attitudes of individuality, thrift, domesticity, and participation in a stable labor market. The normative assumptions embedded in the primers are all the more concerning given that the primers' "textual authority" takes as a given that learners aspire to, already, or should identify with the experience of members of a homogenous, white middle class. Aronowitz and Giroux note that textual authority is both pedagogical and political in "[offering] readers particular subject positions, ideological references that provide but do not rigidly determine particular views of the world" (26–27), and I would add, learners' understanding of their placement in that worldview.

Notably absent in the primers is direct reference to or positive depiction of difference, whether it be race, class, language varieties, cultures, or places. Stripped of difference, “there emerges no sense of culture as a field of struggle, or as a domain of competing interests in which dominant and subordinate groups live out and make sense of their given circumstances and conditions of life” (Aronowitz and Giroux 49). While serving to redress a real need in providing adult literacy education—the primer used in the Moonlight Schools in Kentucky frames literacy as a program to emancipate adult illiterates (see Stewart *Moonlight Schools*; see NeCamp)—the assumption undergirding the primers that literacy education is a neutral, value-free practice circumscribes a world and worldview that bears little resemblance to, and tacit critique of, the experience of being African American in the Jim Crow South, as I will discuss below.

While a thorough discussion of all the primers Varela consulted is beyond the scope of this article, I use two representative samples to briefly illustrate the pervasiveness of the hidden curriculum in recreating community hierarchies and offering a normative vision of everyday life that excludes African Americans. On the SNCC *Digital Gateway* website, Varela has included two samples of the kinds of literacy materials that were available, *Country Life Readers* and *A Day with the Brown Family*. Each of the primers employ simple one or two-syllable words to construct brief, relatively uncomplicated sentence patterns, a testable, progressive practice commonly used with children to build on their ability to read, but one which does little to build on adult learners’ own knowledge, language use, or partial literacy. In the *Country Life Readers: Book One*, the primer’s classist and racist conflation of place and personhood recreates textually the community hierarchies marginalizing African Americans in the South.

In the sample from the *Country Life Readers: First Book*, an image is shown of a white couple riding leisurely on horseback, observing a house in the countryside (Stewart 25). Above the image is a series of key words from the reading passage: ugly, lazy, yes, needs, dirty, shiftless, paint, weeds. Below the image is a dialogue that provides context for using these words:

“This place is dirty and ugly. The house needs paint. The yard is full of weeds. A lazy, shiftless family lives here.”

“Yes, but how do you know that?”

“I know it from the house. Lazy, shiftless people live in dirty, ugly homes.”

The trees in the yard are leafless, the yard is filled with debris, and the house’s crumbling chimney, sagging porch, and misshapen windows all lend a sense of deep poverty to the scene. Underneath the text, the last sentence has been printed in cursive script. Putatively, this serves a practical end of providing a lesson in writing instruction. However, as is common in the reader, the cursive sentence also serves to emphasize and distill a moral lesson in simple, unambiguous terms.

Though Varela includes only the one page in the SNCC *Digital Gateway*, in the primer this scene is preceded by another house on the couple’s tour. By contrast, the

house seems spacious and is well kept, while the yard is manicured. Here, as above, the couple assess the property and people living there. A “nice house,” “it is neat and clean,” and “has flowers in it.” The trees and bushes in the yard are healthy and leafy. “People that go down this road say: ‘A nice, neat family lives in this house. We know the family from the house that it lives in’” (24). Like in the other scene, the last lines copied in script below the dialogue emphasize the moral of the literacy lesson: “A nice, neat family lives in a nice, neat house” (24). In a brief two-page survey of the countryside, the primer neatly collapses place, personhood, class, culture, and identity to a stark binary center-margin relationship. The nice, neat house and people are coded as sharing in the properties of whiteness, whereas the unseen “shiftless, lazy people” that live in “dirty, ugly houses” are relegated to a marginal position as the whites’ other, whether that be a distinction in class, industriousness, or race.

Visually, the scenes offer an interesting lesson in identification as the spatial logic of the center provides the interpretive lens for learners. While the couple are shown in the “dirty ugly house” scene, in the “nice, neat, house” scene we are more intimately positioned in their perspective and see only the house and, presumably, the owner, a white man in a suit and hat, leaning against the outside of the fence. His own horse stands beside him, as he looks invitingly back at the couple. In the next scene, we see that the couple shares similar class traits with the man in the “nice, neat house” scene. Dressed in “formal” riding attire and white themselves, with the leisure time to casually ride through the countryside, they are of a similar type: white, middle or upper-middle class. By extension, they are “nice, neat people” who have the morally correct position to interpret and levy judgement. Visually, learners are positioned as the couple, providing the “textual authority” sanctioning *their* assessment as *the learner’s* own. The authority of the couple’s assertion seems self-evident: we look with them at the house and waiting man and see what they see, a nice, neat house with a nice, neat (white) man as a synecdoche of the nice, neat (white) family.

By contrast, in the “dirty-ugly-house-lazy-people” scene, the audience is kept at a distance from the house; the couple and their dialogue is placed as the subject in the foreground, creating a distance between the reader and couple, a position that mirrors the couple’s separation from the “dirty, ugly house” in the background. The “lazy shiftless people” remain unseen and unable to talk back to the couple’s judgement of their home and character. Visually, this remove positions learners to participate with the couple in coming to a similar conclusion: “lazy, shiftless people live in dirty, ugly houses.”

While the visual play between audience, couple, and house creates a distancing effect on the page, the language used to describe the “dirty, ugly” house draws on familiar tropes of filth and waste to construct a moral dichotomy that neatly reduce the impoverished house and family to a singular moral position, effectively consigning the dirty, ugly house and lazy, shiftless family to the margin. In *Geographies of Exclusion*, David Sibley argues that “the imperative of ‘distancing from disgust’ (Constance Perin) translates into several different corporeal or social images which signal imperfection or lower ranking in the hierarchy of being” (14). Whether these images employ race, nature, or lifestyles that threaten the perceived order of “being,” “they all

come back to the idea of dirt as a signifier of imperfection or inferiority, the reference point being the white, often male, physically and mentally able person” (14). Here, the marginal status of the site in the primer remains uncontested. The couple’s delivery of judgement (dirty, ugly houses; lazy, shiftless people) from their own moral position in the center (nice, neat houses and people) is final. For many in the impoverished African American communities SNCC would work with, the primer asks of them to take up an experience of oppression that “had been ‘normal’ for generations for those born and raised under southern U.S. Apartheid” (Varela, “Time” 564). In recreating and sanctioning the spatialized moral economy of center-margin relations, employing dirt as a “signifier of imperfection or inferiority,” the primer’s normative vision of existing community hierarchies troubles developing literacy as a tool to “build [the] pride and hope” (Varela, “Time” 569) necessary to cultivate a new ethos in the African American community.

The *Country Life Readers* offers a geography of exclusion, bolstered by the primer’s “textual authority” to map a geography of power in which the margin is defined in opposition to the values aligned with whiteness: middle and upper class life, industriousness, and dominance over the landscape. However, *A Day with the Brown Family* effects a less overtly didactic model of white spatiality by using the lives of a middle class white family as the model of literacy education. Learners are positioned as passive observers looking in on the day-to-day activities of the Brown family. We see Mrs. Brown cook dinner as the daughter sets the table in time for Mr. Brown’s arrival from work. On Sundays, they attend church, and after Sunday School return home for dinner before setting back out again for the evening service. They spend time together, go to the park, like music, read regularly, and listen to the news. Together, the images and text communicate a middle-class setting regulated by clear gender roles, an orderly house, a reliable daily schedule, and the benefits of industriously participating in the labor force.

The margin is silenced explicitly in the *Country Life Readers*; in *A Day with the Brown Family* the existence of life in the margin is simply absent. Connecting literacy education to a middle-class ethos offers learners the promise of the literacy myth. As Harvey Graff discusses, the “literacy myth” has long offered the promise of economic and social benefits by providing literacy learners with the tools needed to enter into public, civic, and economic life, while enriching their own individual intellectual abilities. However, like the *Country Life Readers*, *A Day with the Brown Family* synthesizes a singular worldview, framing literacy education as a project of maintaining and delimiting the terrain of everyday life as a particularly white, middle-class property. Prendergast uses the “concept of property in its broader definition as a quality, trait, or attribute” (8) to suggest that literacy has been seen and used as a way of distinguishing and protecting white property from “undesirable” minorities. To paraphrase Prendergast, not only literacy, but the middle-class ethos of the primer and the pathway to the celebrated rewards of the literacy myth is the property of a white, middle-class citizenry.

Sibley notes that “The simple questions we should be asking are: who are places for, whom do they exclude, and how are these prohibitions maintained in practice”

(X). When Varela points out that available literacy materials “insult the dignity of life in the black belt” (“Goals” 2), she raises a critical question about the consequences of literacy materials, one that asks not only what values, knowledge, linguistic traditions, and identities are circulated and lent the textual authority to become sanctioned knowledge, but also what are the effects of literacy education. Who is invited into the worldview embedded in the materials, what is asked of them to be “let in,” and who do they serve? As the rise of New Literacy Studies has illustrated, literacy is never a simple, neutral skill; rather the ideology of any particular conception of literacy has material consequences, as the materials of literacy value particular languages, knowledges, politics, cultures, and ways of being and dwelling in the world.

The primers neither addressed the conditions of life for African Americans, nor did they provide the means to build on the knowledge, experience, and literacy, however limited, the community members already had. In reflecting middle-class values, hierarchical learning strategies, and dominant discourses regulating the organization of social life, the available literacy materials also reflected dominant discourses of supremacy, exclusion, and deprivation by taking white, middle-class life as the central tenet of value and effectively erasing African Americans from the educational landscape. Absent from the literacy materials, the effect was to subject the lives of African Americans to the same projected discourse that they faced in institutional settings—that the needs and desires structuring their lives were of little to no consequence. In contrast to the oppressive ideological framework offered by the primers, Varela’s projected design of literacy materials sought to create a space from which learners could speak. Central to her objectives in addressing these concerns by creating new literacy materials, then, is Varela’s desire “to help an adult create a vision for himself as a political entity and as an agent for social change” (qtd. in Perlstein, “Teaching Freedom” 304). By shaping literacy materials to build on local practices in Selma, Varela hoped literacy education would promote a cogent identity and individual and communal ethos, from which the African American community could engage dominant, oppressive practices and discourses, and articulate a vision that would transform the social realities resulting from that oppression.

Integrating Community Knowledge and Experience in Literacy Materials

The more time Varela spent with the community, the more she became attuned to identifying the richness of the community’s knowledge and experience, as well as their understanding of the issues their community faced that could be employed in developing alternative literacy materials. “The assets were already there,” she says, “it wasn’t a negative space that we were filling. [. . .] there was a lot there” (Varela and Long 3). Spending time in local spaces, she “began to get small insights into this rich culture of the Deep South with its persistent traditional practices” (Varela, “Time” 569). One woman, Mrs. Caffee, helped her to learn to re-see the South through the lens of local knowledge. While fishing one day, Mrs. Caffee pointed out what Varela saw as a weed could be used as medicine or as a tonic to combat “that lazy feeling that came with Spring” (569). Out of Varela’s conversations within the community,

she came to realize that people communicating not only what they needed, but what they know, might serve as the grounds for developing literacy materials for adult education. “If SNCC were going to develop a literacy program that would not just teach reading but build pride and hope,” she realized, “materials rooted in black culture and history would have to be created from scratch” (Varela, “Time” 569). As a first step to capturing local knowledge, experience, and expertise, Varela turned to recording people communicating what they are doing. Recording people provided the material that showed just what the white-authored primers did not: local language used by community members sharing their expertise to communicate information about community life. “What I learned in the Selma Literacy Project was, use people’s own words,” Varela recalls (Varela and Long 3). Perhaps the farthest-reaching decision Varela makes though is in insisting that the “curriculum should attempt to include wherever possible movies, audio-visual materials and other experiential situations to broaden the experience of the adult” (“Goals” 4).

Unfortunately, the story of the Selma Literacy Project ended rather abruptly when the four African American student volunteers were arrested and exposed as SNCC activists. To do the work of the Selma Literacy Project, Varela and the volunteers had to work “underground,” ostensibly serving St. Elizabeth’s parish, to avoid encounters with the infamous Sheriff Jim Clark. The day after the Civil Rights Act was passed, the volunteers went to test the waters at a local ice cream parlor. Instead of being served in accordance with the law, they were arrested. Once their affiliation with SNCC was known, they were unable to continue working behind the scenes in Selma (“Interview,” *This Light of Ours* 220). Shortly after the Selma Literacy Project ended, Varela moved to Tougaloo, Mississippi, to continue her work with SNCC developing literacy materials. However, she left Selma armed with “a very exciting concept of literacy materials and their uses” (Varela, “The Selma Literacy Project: A Report” 11). Varela’s effort to produce an ethos of place took a much clearer direction in Mississippi when she shifted her efforts to focus, from “[using] people’s words” to integrating “their words” with visual rhetorics (Varela and Long 3). Varela’s frustration with the predominance of white, oppressive culture in literacy materials and her desire to create literacy materials that reflected an ethos of place in showing communities taking action “grew into, then, the idea of filmstrips” (Varela, “Personal Interview”). In examining the use of these new literacy materials, we can better elaborate how an ethos of place is central to the relationship between literacy practices and community action.

In the following section, I ground my discussion of ethos of place with an audience member’s response at a 1967 meeting of African American farmworkers evicted from their plantations for their affiliation with movement activities. At this meeting, Varela had shown *The Farmworkers Strike*, a three-part filmstrip that she produced telling the story of Mexican American California agricultural workers, led by Cesar Chavez, organizing the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee union. From this powerful moment of identification with the work and struggle of Latinx workers in California, I then focus on another of Varela’s filmstrips, *If You Farm You Can Vote*, which depicts an African American community in Mississippi organizing a voter reg-

istration initiative to take control of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service committee. The filmstrip's presentation of a familiar community addressing a shared concern in a recognizable community setting offers further grounds for the shared identification that facilitates the emergence of an ethos of place.

Filmstrips, Emergent Ethos

Flickering up on the parish hall walls were photographs of Mexican American union organizers and field workers being assaulted by white growers and hauled away to jail by white law enforcers. When the strip ended, there was a long silence. In the audience was an older gentleman who had worked all his life on a plantation in Tennessee and was now homeless, evicted as a result of his participation in the movement. He rose up and with tears in his eyes said, "you don't know how it feels to know that we are not the only ones."

– Maria Varela, "Time" 576

In this rather dramatic moment of catharsis, relief, and joy, Varela narrates the emergence of an ethos of place in this man's dawning awareness of his camaraderie with a sub-nation moving in tandem with his own actions. Curricula designed in the Citizenship Schools, Freedom Schools, and Varela's own literacy materials included historical material on African Americans' contribution to the nation in an effort to foster a new identification with an imagined community (for a discussion of Citizenship Schools, see Feigenbaum; Kates; Levine; Lathan *Freedom Writing*; Lathan "Testimony"; for a discussion of Freedom Schools, see Cobb; Schneider; Perlstein). Of her decision to integrate African American history in the literacy materials she developed with African American communities, Varela recalls how "I had seen African American students' eyes shine and their heads lift proudly when they read stories of accomplishments of African civilizations and African American heroes" ("Time" 569). This formative moment of recognition, like that of the man watching the filmstrip, signals a new imagined relationship with the nation, one of belonging, if not shared investment in the struggle for equality. Benedict Anderson argues that a nation "is an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). For African Americans, who have long had a troubled relationship to the way the nation imagines itself from the vantage point of white domination, Anderson's definition of a nation poses a number of difficulties, not the least of which was to imagine being a part of a political community when the habits of citizenship—those practices of a sovereign people governing who could speak, when and where, and reasonably expect to be heard (Allen 4–6)—had for so long been constrained by cultural, legal, economic, and geographic prohibitions. The flickering light, the portrayal of local people organizing a union, the dissemination of shared knowledge, the embodiment of local spaces, the identification with a larger geography of communities all help to theorize how the use of filmstrips for literacy education constitutively invoke a new

ethos of place—an imagined and embodied relationship between local and national communities that offers a new identity and sense of participatory agency.

Varela's lesson from Selma—"use people's own words" and her realization that "people wanted to know" how other communities were organizing—reflect the common use of narrative and testimony in African American rhetorical traditions (Varela and Long 4). Geneva Smitherman argues that, "The relating of events (real or hypothetical) becomes a black rhetorical strategy" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 147–148) for speakers to "render their general abstract observations about life, love, people in the form of a concrete narrative" (147). A primary narrative tradition is the testimony. "To testify," she writes, "is to tell the truth through 'story'" (150). In secular contexts, testimony treats subject matters like relationships, the skill of a speaker or musician, and "experiences attesting to the racist power of the white oppressor." Audiences "vicariously experience what the testifier has gone through" in "a communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences. Thus, one's humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her sense of isolation is diminished" (Smitherman 150). Rhea Estelle Lathan takes this a step forward, noting that "the *purpose* of a testimony is to empower by communicating life-giving, life-changing solutions" ("Testimony" 34; emphasis in original). Through the narrative of local communities acting for change, the filmstrips use testimony to critically bring together the individuals and local and distant communities as an imagined political community responding as sovereign agents deciding *what constitutes literacy and its usefulness in addressing* histories of exclusion and marginalization.

Varela discusses several filmstrips in a report to a funder, but of these filmstrips, the only ones available are *If You Farm You Can Vote*, discussed here, and *The Farm Workers Strike*. As evidence of the usefulness of structuring literacy programs around community learning traditions and needing to know how to "do something," *If You Farm You Can Vote* uses a narrative mode of discourse to "tell a kind of folk story revelatory of the culture and experience of Black America" (Smitherman 155); in drawing on the "culture and experience of Black America," narrative is used to re-narrate the historic exclusion of African Americans from dominant discourse. As the narrative in *If You Farm You Can Vote* of farmers organizing in Madison County, Mississippi, attests, the ASCS has traditionally been run by white farmers, so the extra cotton allotments would be given to the "big farms and plantations" run by the white farmers, leaving the "black small farmer" with barely "more than a half to two acres over his allotted acres to plant cotton. Cotton money multiplies for those who already have it" (Varela, "Report" 5). The filmstrip makes it clear that there are discrete identities at risk from civic processes (as well as physical violence). Civic procedures are represented as discourses somewhat alien to the citizens' common experience, while simultaneously in the process of constructing them as "other" and effectively excluding many citizens from the active democratic practice/identity of "citizenship." The filmstrip responds to this racist exclusion and helps citizens to navigate that discursive system by communicating "life-giving, life-changing solutions" (Lathan, "Testimony" 34). In this section I discuss how, through the use of narrative testimony, the filmstrip employs community members' recorded speech to demystify complicated technical

material that has been a barrier to community members' participation in civic life. Visually, the use of a series of images of community spaces and local people participating in organizing their community redefines community space and offers new models of leadership.

The opening sequence of the filmstrip announces the topic, then shows a local family, followed by a man in a community meeting of farmers organizing for the vote (Slide 1–3). This brief sequence putting community life and activism in the foreground visually connects everyday local people and communities working for change, both acknowledging a history of systemic exclusion from civic life and foregrounding the community's own agency in working to address an immediate exigency—voting in a local farming board election would provide the community with the voice to transform their economic life. Following this, a slide asking “WHY?” (Slide 4) begins explaining the need to vote in the election: African American farmers have been both subject to the ASCS decisions and also excluded from participating in the committee. “But is it your committee?” (Slide 6) a slide asks before comparing the traditionally white composition of the committee with the demographics of the communities: next to a map of the county we are told that the communities are “3/4 Negro” (Slide 7–8). Conscious of the history of violence and dispossession the community has experienced with voter registration, the next sequence begins by explaining how ASCS elections are different, starting with the fact that “You don't have to go down to the courthouse to register.” The subsequent slides detail who can vote (farm owners, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and women under certain circumstances), what is entailed in the process of filling out a petition to nominate candidates, instructions on how to vote by mail, and the decisions board members make that immediately affect the community (“gives out cotton acreage”; “decides who gets extra acreage”; “hires the surveyor”; “decides who gets CCC loans”; and “hires the office supervisor” [Slides 22–26]).

Interspersed throughout the sequence are images of community members “organizing early” and notifications to encourage community members to participate. One slide shows a person working on filling out a form next to the announcement that “Madison County farmers are organizing early this year” (Slide 15). In another, the announcement that “This year we vote by mail” is shown next to a mailbox (Slide 50). In a further reassurance that this year's election is different, a slide shows a hand drawn graphic of African American and white men gathered around a desk watching the vote be counted; “Anyone can watch” is printed underneath (Slide 51). “Know your candidates” is written at the top of another showing a hand drawn graphic of five African American candidates for the committee; underneath, the compelling directive is completed: “Vote only for them” (Slide 40).

After explaining the “technical” process of the election, the slide show returns to the need for community members to vote. This sequence draws on the personal testimony of community leader, Luther Honeysucker. Honeysucker draws on his community's experience farming and dealing with the ASCS as he narrates both how the ASCS has cheated “little farmers” and how changing the make-up of the community committees can radically change the make-up of the county committee and give Afri-

can Americans—the little farmers—a voice. “A lot [sic] of us little farmers were short on acres,” he says before explaining how “Negro farmers have been cheated.” Even though the community has the desire and resources to grow more crops, they have been limited by the ASCS, noting that the “big farmers”—represented by a drawing of a white man smoking a cigar in a comfortable chair—get to earn more, though he adds, “we would plant more except we can’t get no more” (Slides 55–69). The filmstrip moves to a conclusion by offering a call to action: “Remember” a slide announces, before synthesizing the earlier explanations of voting, nominating, and changing the board membership to narrate a vision of what could happen if the farmers organize and participate in voting. Starting with a hand-drawn graphic of two African Americans voting, the short storyline concludes with a hand-drawn graphic of a changed community board that has led to a change in the county board’s racial makeup (Slides 70–77). A final sequence showing “the calendar to remember” provides the relevant dates for petitioning, nominating, and voting in the election (Slides 78–83). The filmstrip ends with a powerful overhead photo of the farmers in a circle, with “Unity in our community” in print underneath (Slide 84).

The use of a community’s own narrative testimony about the experience of organizing to vote in the ASCS election not only positions community members as teachers, but also positions local language traditions at the center of rhetorical education. After observing the success of the filmstrips, Varela explains, “the vocabulary and language style of ‘uneducated’ people does a better job of communicating information to be used than does any carefully constructed, grammatically correct treatise” available from the Department of Agriculture or produced by SNCC organizers (“Report” 8). *If You Farm You Can Vote* takes “the complicated technical material” that illustrates how to elect farmers to the ASCS Committee and “break[s] it down into a useable form” (Varela, “Report” 5). The concentration of wealth in the hands of white farmers and poverty in the African American communities is perpetuated by the “complicated technical material” involved in the election process, creating a barrier to access that excluded African Americans from the process. By contrast, the filmstrip uses the recorded speech of farmers in Madison County, Mississippi, to explain procedures of participating in the election. After the directive to “Know Your Candidates. Vote only for them,” the filmstrip provides a step by step guide on how to properly fill out and submit a ballot.

Here I walk through each step to demonstrate how the complicated technical material is communicated in simple terms and to illustrate the disorienting wealth of literate practices required to make sense of the process for new voters. The first slide instructing learners how to fill out the voting application is a photo of a blank envelope and the official voting ballot (which has the list of candidates and official set of instructions), reminding the audience that the ballot will arrive by mail (Slide 41). The next two slides show the front and back of the “official” envelope to be used in submitting the ballot. The front bears the imprint of the “UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service,” is marked as “OFFICIAL BUSINESS,” is addressed to a local ASCS Office, is marked “PLEASE POSTMARK,” and in the bottom left corner, in a separate box,

“ASCS ELECTION BALLOT” (Slide 42). The back of the envelope shows where the voter should enter their address and a separate box, seemingly stamped on the envelope, where the voter must “certify that the enclosed ballot filed in the ASCS Community Election was voted personally by me without duress, menace, or undue influence by any person whatsoever, (criminal penalty for making a false statement: Fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment.” Underneath the certification statement is a space for the voter’s signature, a date, the signature of a witness, and a reminder: “(must be witnessed if voter signs by mark)” (Slide 43). The subsequent slide shows the hand of a farmer with a pencil making an X next to a candidate’s name (Slide 44). The next slides show the farmer’s hands inserting the folded ballot into the blank envelope (Slide 45), sealing the envelope (Slide 46), and inserting the blank envelope containing the ballot into the “official” envelope (Slide 47). The final photo in the sequence, shows a strip of paper with “A WITNESSED MARK” on top of the backside of the envelope, reminding community members of the crucial final step of certifying the ballot and including a witness’s signature (Slide 48). Using simple images, the filmstrip helps learners navigate the complicated series of literacy practices involved by providing a guide through each stage of a multistep process, any part of which risks invalidating the learner’s voice in the election.

For audiences, the filmstrip’s lesson in civic literacy provided a revelatory experience. Audience members’ responses signal both a transformed understanding of the process and the importance of collective action. “*For the first time* I understand this business with the envelopes,” one woman said (Varela, “Report” 6; emphasis added). Another man’s statement that, “*Now* I understand what this cotton committee is all about,” suggests that his understanding of the cotton committee transcends the practical; he has a new understanding of the role his participation in shaping the committee membership can have in transforming the community’s economic and political subjugation by an all-white committee made up of “big farmers” (“Report” 6; emphasis added). Another man’s comment shows a heightened awareness of the need for every individual in the community to work together toward a shared end: “*Now* I understand why it’s important for us to elect a lot of people all over the county” (“Report” 6; emphasis added). Prohibitions from civic life have not only legal, political, social, and economic consequences; they are also deeply felt, embodied dispositions arising from a history of dwelling “in the shadow of the plantation” (Clark qtd. in Tjerandsen 155), a community ethos that Charles M. Payne describes from his experience working for SNCC as “the ‘plantation mentality,’ an ingrained sense of helplessness and dependence on whites” (255). Varela offers a succinct synthesis of how the use of community members’ recorded narrative testimony about organizing for change resulted in a new disposition for civic participation in the community: “The local people who have expressed a desire to construct [literacy] materials are learning that their point of view and their own expression is valuable in that it tells a story more expressively and in a generally more useful way. This allows people to slowly grow out of their inner paralysis about expressing their needs or aspirations” (“Report” 8). Varela’s comment linking together literacy materials, rhetorical traditions, language use, and embodiment echo the audience members’ moment of rev-

elation: “For the first time I understand”; “Now I understand.” However, as the man who reported understanding the importance of widespread activism suggests, more than a “coming to voice” moment, this newly embodied disposition reflects a larger identification with the shared struggle of distant communities and a new mental map and spatial understanding of the networked communities involved in the movement, those marginal sites living in “the shadow of the plantation.” In using narrative testimony and local language practices to demystify civic practices and invoke a communal call to action around an exigence shared with other communities, the filmstrips demonstrate a new way of seeing and knowing the margin, not as the shadow of a plantation system, but as a vital resource for building and sharing knowledge, for developing agency, and providing a model of the community’s rhetorical innovation.

This redefinition of community space and new model of leadership is strikingly evident in how photos of community sites and members are integrated into the visual design of the filmstrip. Varela recalls, “These materials all required photographs. I could find nothing in the published world that showed black people taking leadership to change their communities” (“Time” 575). As I have suggested, Clark’s characterization of the embodied experience of African Americans living “in the shadow of the plantation” is more than a metaphor; it is a pointed diagnosis of the racialization of space in the Jim Crow South—a racialization clearly invoked in the textual space of literacy materials available at the time, as evident in *Country Life Readers’* stark binary conceptualization of white space (nice, neat people living in nice, neat houses) and marginal space (lazy, shiftless people living in dirty, ugly houses). By casting a light on the sites of the community and community members’ activism, the filmstrips dispel the shadow and reveal—bring to presence—a new ethos of place.

The filmstrip integrates images of community members in front of sheds (Slide 2) and on porches (Slides 13, 65), crop fields (Slides 1, 66, 68), and farming implements (Slides 1, 65), to ground the narrative in community life and practices. The intimate shots of families and women in front of sheds and on porches remind the community that public resistance is built out of these private “homeplaces” (hooks). While the crop fields and farming implements serve a practical purpose of grounding the discussion of the ASCS committee, they also serve as a reminder that these sites of everyday labor are contested sites where the struggle over race, identity, economic well-being, and respect are carried out. “Negro Farmers Have Been Cheated” announces one slide (Slide 64). In an acknowledgement of that struggle and as a pointed rejoinder to the commonplace of African Americans as “lazy and shiftless,” one slide shows a crop field overlaid with Luther Honeysuckle’s declaration: “We would plant more except we can’t get no more” (Slide 68). Integrated throughout are images of men and women in the process of organizing for change. In meeting halls, community members are shown as leaders sharing information about their experience organizing (Slides 3, 15, 16, 55). In street scenes, community members are shown standing up, speaking out, and coming together (Slide 38, 84). In closely framed shots, community members are shown together, engaged in doing the work of organizing as they help each other to fill out paperwork (Slides 10, 29, 75). As mentioned above, the final image offers a vision of what “unity in our community” would look like. Or-

ganized in a circle, the farmers are gathered in a public space to work together for a shared end (Slide 84). This final slide synthesizes the filmstrip's central theme: individual people, by taking up shared leadership roles in their community and joining in collective civic activism, can transform a long-lived history of subjugation and marginalization. By drawing on the "assets" of the community, communal leadership makes possible new public action.

The filmstrips offered a rhetorical position—a new ethos of place—largely unavailable in the popular media and available literacy materials by redefining the spaces in which African Americans were taking action and by offering an alternative model of leadership. In contrast to the media portrayals of African Americans as a faceless, voiceless body of people, spoken for by a charismatic leader, in the filmstrips, Varela said, "we were shooting the people as actors, not as victims" ("Personal Interview"). Focusing on local efforts, the filmstrips emphasize that "There is no one organization organizing this movement; there is no one group of elite leaders creating its program" ("Report" 2). By focusing on how communities are engaging institutional discourse, the filmstrips show African Americans in social spaces participating in civic practices—as community leaders holding and participating in meetings, nominating candidates, and interviewing African American candidates. By integrating everyday sites, the filmstrips evoke and give presence to the shared, lived spaces where community life unfolds. In each of these instances the filmstrips portray values and conditions critically important to establishing an ethos of place: they project agency in depicting ordinary people as active citizens, not victims; they create an embodied sense of community efforts and struggles by producing an imagined and real sub-nation. They employ and privilege local language practices and rhetorical traditions to communicate the experiential knowledge needed for access to civic life and the possibility of changing their immediate social, economic, and political life as audiences come to take up and embody a new ethos of place.

Conclusion

I do not mean to suggest that simply watching a filmstrip brought into being a new ethos for the community. The filmstrips exist in a larger assemblage of influences, including Varela's experience in different communities, histories of education in the South, the activist community members and those hesitant to take action, SNCC's longer terms initiatives and members, the history of white domination in the South (including laws, habits of citizenship, resources, etc.), African American activist traditions preceding the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and African American traditions of institution building, language use, and cultural practices, amongst others. Nor do I mean to suggest that the filmstrips resulted in an immediate sea change in the institutions circumscribing the life of African American communities. They did not. Given the number of actors involved in the ASCS elections, no singular literacy event could. Imagining otherwise would be naive. As had often been the case with elections, African American farmers were harassed during the election process, and the ASCS remained dominated by white farmers.

However, the filmstrips' success should not be measured by this immediate activist goal. Rather, the filmstrips' reinvention of the margin as a space of possibility invites the audience to develop the habits of citizenship and literate practices that could transform everyday life. Varela writes that the goals of her literacy pedagogy aspire to enable adults to live "a fully human life" by building on the assets of community spaces ("Goals" 1). Much of Varela's pedagogical discussion emphasizes building critical consciousness in order to initiate significant change. The new literacy materials "hope to reflect the needs of the adult's life, to bring about an understanding of the forces in society which may have contributed to those needs and to present the possibility of changing those forces to help answer those needs" ("Goals" 1). Living "a fully human life" can be achieved then by creating a system of literacy education that works to join the learners' experience and modes of discourse to a broader understanding of the cultural and civic discourses that have been/are instrumental in shaping their lived realities. Literacy practices, Varela suggests, are instrumental in developing critical agency and taking action to re-shape discourses to more equitable ends. Her emphasis on meeting the needs of the community is grounded in a belief that no liberation from oppression occurs unless the oppressed are central to effecting that change (Varela, "Goals" 1).

The filmstrips produced by the community and Varela draw on the strengths of a long tradition of what Ella Baker called "semi public discourse" in hush harbor sites. Where previously that resistance may have been constrained to local currents, through the use of the community's language traditions, narrative testimonial rhetorical traditions, and visual focus on local spaces and community members acting as leaders, the filmstrips employ that discourse and sense of resistance to craft a new dwelling space. These new literacy practices help evoke an ethos of place from which disenfranchised African Americans are able to navigate dominant discourses, re-narrate dominant discourses, and produce counter-linguistic practices that effectively authorize African American voices in democratic practices that had historically privileged white citizens. While providing an intergroup sanctuary in which multiple voices circulate, the social space born of an ethos of place produces new, differently articulated "agitational" and arguably liberatory alternatives to the hegemonic stratification of social relations in the South.

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