

Crystal R. Sanders. *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle..* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 267 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-2780-9.

Reviewed by Alex Tabor

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Commissioned by Evan C. Rothera (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

In *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle*, Crystal R. Sanders, associate professor in the departments of history and African American studies at The Pennsylvania State University, adds to several works highlighting the role of black women and communities in pioneering educational opportunities across the midcentury South. She also illustrates how black women in Mississippi—in the words of activist Fannie Lou Hamer—built power and took long-denied rights for themselves. The Economic Opportunity Act, part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to authorize the use of federal funds in support of local efforts to improve educational opportunities for the poor. The Head Start program, which served as the means through which OEO grants were approved and distributed, provided the program shell within which the Children's Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) formed. Northern liberal supporters of CDGM envisioned the program as a means of involving the poor in their own social, economic, and political uplift through the idea of "maximum feasible participation," but for black women, CDGM presented one way to prepare disadvantaged black children for entrance into an unequal education system (p. 2). While some questioned the authority of the federal government to

engage with counties and municipalities absent of state oversight, at the root of attempts by segregationists to undermine the program was the fact that CDGM provided former sharecroppers with financial independence outside racist employment structures; a professional role in developing and executing curriculum, hiring teachers and staff, and making decisions regarding their children's education; and ultimately an opportunity to continue a tradition of organizing to improve the conditions of black Americans.

Sanders introduces her extensive research by offering readers a brief context for understanding the effort to expand educational access in the Deep South, bringing together diverse organizing endeavors. Direct action campaigns, voter registration efforts, and legislation historically produced by the organizing activities of groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Mississippi failed to produce the first-class citizenship anticipated. In response, "black Mississippians championed a federal anti-poverty Head Start program in order to achieve full freedom, including the financial ability to eat at the lunch counter; the chance to vote without the threat of job termination; and the opportunity to secure quality education for one's children without phys-

ical or financial reprisal,” developing “one of the most impressive examples of participatory democracy in the country” (p. 8). Head Start was a grassroots effort to fill the void between government rhetoric and the reality of “full freedom,” which for black Mississippians included “enforcement of civil rights legislation, the chance to earn a decent wage, the opportunity to participate in community governance, and access to quality education” (p. 1). Though modeled after earlier efforts to expand educational opportunity like the Highlander Folk School and 1964 Freedom Schools, which showed black women “a new approach to teaching and learning that fostered racial pride and civic engagement,” CDGM was unique compared to many earlier initiatives in the predominance of black women in all roles and at all levels of involvement (p. 5). “Just as they had canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings, and more frequently attempted to register to vote, black women in Mississippi took to early childhood education in larger numbers than men, as a way to further movement goals” and “address Mississippi’s intertwined racial and economic problems” (pp. 4-5). Even though men held some administrative and board positions, “Head Start programs nationwide became a vehicle for women-led activism” (p. 4).

In the first of five chapters, Sanders emphasizes the centrality of education to political rights and the exercise of power: “Both slave masters and the enslaved recognized literacy as a key to humanness, a larger world, and freedom itself” (p. 11), and “the acquisition of knowledge ... was the avenue to raise one’s social and economic status and expand one’s horizons” (p. 19). She explains that “white antipathy to black education” was both political and economic: “white supremacists sought to limit black educational opportunities to maintain a large supply of cheap black labor” (p. 14). In the Delta region of Mississippi, where sharecropping—“a racialized political economy ... underpinned by peonage, murder, and disfranchisement”—dictated and reflected

power as distributed by whites (p. 16), “the planter rather than black parents controlled if, when, and for how long black students attended school” (p. 17). Regardless, the public school system “lacked intellectual freedom and accurate and inclusive history” (p. 26) and imparted the values and interests of whites who oversaw curriculum, made hiring and salary decisions, and disciplined without discretion.

Chapter 2 illustrates some of the many ways black Mississippians “took rights and education for themselves” in leading the development of the Head Start curriculum to “change their communities from the ground up” (p. 9). Tom Levin, one thinker behind Head Start, imagined CDGM as similar to “freedom schools” at the preschool level but stressed the importance of “having parents replace the northern white teachers, so that black children saw their parents as role models in positions of authority” (p. 33). Women like Winson Hudson and Minnie Lewis, who traveled over one hundred miles to attend Head Start informational meetings, “hoped that Head Start would give black parents another way to have control over their children’s educational careers” (p. 33). To whites involved in developing the program infrastructure, parent involvement was considered an “antidote to debilitating racism” (p. 34). Because Mississippi did not have public kindergartens and the minimum school age was six, many working-class black children entered the first grade unprepared, so the CDGM program needed to usurp the prevailing exploitative “white power structure” (p. 34). Some key tenets informed by child development experts included a “comprehensive program that improved children’s physical well-being; facilitated children’s mental, emotional, and social development through spontaneity, curiosity, and self-discipline; and established patterns and expectations of success for the children.” The purpose-oriented curriculum was designed to create change agents and encourage self-ownership, control, and decision-making—“helping many black Mississippian’s realize that they could take charge

of the institutions and policies controlling their lives” (p. 29). The prioritizing of black representation in curriculum materials fostered awareness and racial pride and instilled concepts of self-worth, changing “the way people thought about themselves and their potential” (pp. 62-63). Ultimately, CDGM’s curriculum reflected black women’s awareness of “the links between education and full freedom” and gave them the opportunity to “participate in institutional change on a local level” (pp. 10, 64).

In chapter 3, Sanders explains that discriminatory employment practices and the mechanization of agriculture left domestic work as the primary employment available to black women. At the same time black women sought to expand opportunities for themselves and their communities, government reports suggested that “black ‘matriarchy’ harmed black communities.” Instead, the “former sharecroppers and domestics operated eighty-four Head Start centers and oversaw one of the largest federal preschool budgets for eight weeks during the 1965 summer” (p. 96). That eight-week program quickly expanded to cover the entire year—with “4,200 children enrolled from sixty-four communities the first summer”—and acquired “\$15 million in federal assistance” to provide “early childhood education, health screenings, and nutritious meals to more than 6,000 black children” over the following three years (pp. 3, 43). CDGM “provided working-class black women with unprecedented leadership and educational opportunities” (p. 9) and “connected them to a much longer tradition of black women’s activism that began with the black clubwomen’s movement of the late nineteenth century and spanned several generations to include NAACP youth councils and Citizenship Schools” (p. 74).

Chapters 4 and 5 exemplify the myriad ways segregationists worked to undermine the “transformative potential” (p. 9) of CDGM and expose how political pressure by segregationists, especially Mississippi’s Democratic Senator John C.

Stennis, cooled OEO’s initial fervor for CDGM and resulted in the agency’s creation of a competing group named Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP). Sometimes resistance took the form of fabricated reports by informants, charges of fiscal mismanagement and corruption, and violence by private citizens, Klansmen, and the police. To hamper the “economic power and financial freedom” gained by some black communities through participation in Head Start programs, “white citizens ... developed interest in Head Start to gain resources for themselves” (p. 144). Although Governor Johnson and Senator Eastland employed overt racist epithets and boasted staunch resistance to earlier civil rights activity, Senator Stennis questioned the “leadership, qualifications, and bookkeeping of CDGM teachers and administrators” and levied unsubstantiated charges of “fiscal mismanagement and corruption” (pp. 6-7). Fearing a black constituency empowered to “become socially, financially, and politically independent” and therein a collapse of “established order,” Stennis “raised what appeared to be valid criticisms” as “a means to the same end: the preservation of white supremacy” (pp. 116-17). At base, “antagonism” stemmed from “disapproval of a program that usurped white Mississippians’ control over black people rather than ... abhorrence for government spending or administrative errors” (p. 19). Stennis remained silent about other Head Start programs with sloppy bookkeeping operated by political allies, and OEO director Robert Sargent Shriver noted that none of the charges against CDGM “aimed at the quality of the program, its content, its results, or its meaning to the parents and children who participated” (p. 129). To those participants, CDGM “gave meaning to nascent civil rights laws by opening up new channels for black participation in the governance of local communities and the distribution of federal funds” and functioned as “a vehicle for revolution financed by the federal government” (p. 111).

Evoking the feminist activist and writer Audre Lorde, Sanders concludes that “the master’s

tools did not dismantle the master's house, but the radical Head Start program did pave the way for ordinary black people to continue their earlier quests for educational, economic, and racial justice" (p. 192). CDGM "engaged the poor in decision making regarding their children and their communities," and "designing curricula, sitting on Head Start governing boards, and allocating large amounts of federal money provided marginalized citizens with the confidence to go after institutional change in other areas of their lives" (p. 197). A half-century later, Head Start lives on "because its supporters had forced white Mississippians to seek biracial participation in community programs, institutionalizing black access to political power" (p. 181). In tracing the contemporary impact of CDGM, Sanders notes that although the program was defunded after four years—having served thousands of black children between 1965 and 1968 and forever changing the lives of all participants—Head Start programs continue to operate today (p. 187). "The CDGM's story is one of irony" (p. 185), says Sanders. "Local African Americans created a Head Start program so radical that competing programs developed by white supremacists brought black and white Mississippians together as equals at the board table; "even in their opposition to the grassroots initiative, the white ruling class fostered change" (p. 185).

Sanders utilizes a multitude of manuscript sources, personal interviews, and organizational papers to center the activity and organizing of hundreds of black women responsible for CDGM's successes amidst the tumult of evolving political dynamics, between the fluidity and ever-changing relationships of civil rights organizations working in different manners towards the same causes, and within the traditions of African American organizing from the late nineteenth century forward. The magnification of the often-overlooked contributions of women to the black freedom struggle, to the livelihoods of their families and communities, and to the defense of the rights and freedoms of working-class Americans is but one

merit of this work. In transforming the monographic focus on the CDGM program into a sweeping analysis of black women's activism, an investigation of grassroots and national politics, and interrogation of the intersections of social, economic, and political freedoms, Sanders's work is necessary reading for anyone concerned with education, civil rights, and the role of black women in both, and will add breadth and depth to any course where black history in the United States is a guiding theme or topical focus.

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