

Race, Youth, and Student: A (Trans)formation of characters from the 1960 Greensboro Sit-in

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Abstract

In 1960, college students walked off their campuses and into the surrounding community of Greensboro to claim their place as citizens and as human beings. This paper examines the case of the Greensboro sit-ins as a case of character (trans)formation through the simultaneous breaking hegemonic moralities and shaping of new moralities. Morally inspired and inspiring, these young, black students transgressed the normative ideologies to which they once consented as blacks, youth and students, and, consequently, transformed public assumptions about character.

Race, Youth, and Student: A (Trans)formation of characters from the 1960 Greensboro Sit-ins

In 1960, college students walked off their campuses and into the surrounding community of Greensboro to claim their place as citizens and as human beings. By sitting down and asking to be served at racially segregated lunch counters, students became activists, stimulating a decade-long shift in the way we think of race, youth, and students. This paper examines the case of the Greensboro sit-ins as a case of character (trans)formation through the simultaneous breaking of hegemonic moralities and shaping of new moralities.

Before we examine this transformation, let me address the conceptual framework that undergirds it. Specifically, when saying transformation, I am concerned with character, fitting with the theme of this conference. While I am sure that conference participants will explore the many ways with which we might conceive of character, I am concerned with character in a rhetorical sense. Rhetorical character is bound up with an Aristotelian sense of *ethos* which includes the practical wisdom sense-making of *phronēsis* and the morality of *arête*. My rhetorical approach to character, however, also reflects the shift in field of rhetoric towards seeing communication as constitutive. Before a speaker can make appeals to credibility, their character is already shaped. As Kenneth Burke has taught us,¹ identification is the premise on which persuasion can occur. Our initial sense-making and moral self are already constituted by the discourses into which we are born and to which we are subject.

For the students in Greensboro who sat at a segregated lunch counter asking to be served, the status quo discourses initially shaping their moral character justified their

¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

separation based on race, their immaturity due to their age, and their unpreparedness because they were students. These positions were just common sense, which is to say they are ideologies made to seem natural, or as Antonio Gramsci called it, hegemony.² The means by which ruling classes maintain their control through ideas rather than force, hegemony relies on our acceptance of the rightness or morality of the status quo. We are interpellated, as Louis Althusser puts it. In other words, individuals are made subject to dominating ideologies, which is how, I contend, marginalized character formation initially takes shape at home. We consent to our own subjugation because the characteristics with which we identify are already constituted in discourse. Such character formation begins the moment we are born, as we make sense of our world and moralize it with the identities and discursive categories provided. We take the socially constructed world in which we live as natural, which is how hegemony gets under our skin without us being aware.

This positioning force is part of the reason why the request to be served by the students in Greensboro was so significant. Their request defies the subjugating ideologies to which they were interpellated by the discourses. The Greensboro Four resisted subjugating discourses of home and society that initially constitute their characters. However, their rhetorical action did not remain isolated; it spread not because other young black students were persuaded by them. Instead, to use Kenneth Burke's conceptual framework, it spread because young black students identified with their actions. Regardless of their intent, the Greensboro Four began a character transformation that upended hegemonic moralities that subjugated those who shared their identities. The challenge to transform society when the disciplining powers of hegemony are

² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

already at work in our head is not, as Michel Foucault puts it, “to liberate the individual from the state and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state.”³ According to Foucault, the solution is “to promote new forms of subjectivity.”⁴ Such new forms reconstitute people’s practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and morality (*arête*), and thus the *ethos* of people and the discursive spaces in which they imagine themselves. Whether they realized it or not at the time, the four freshman sitting at the lunch counter in Greensboro in 1960 did just that. In this paper, I examine how and why new forms of character created the counterhegemonic conditions to transform themselves and others as well as the ideological homes in which we find ourselves. I look at three levels: race, age, and institutional home.

Race

Subject to the norms of race, students grew up with a status quo morality of segregation, in which people of color were taught to accept their position as inferior. By sitting, these students refused to consent.

By 1960, the South had suffered from over a half a century of segregation. Laws, policies, and traditions barred certain bodies from designated areas or separated them from public or quasi-public spaces where they were unwanted by the so-called public. These cultural and legal codes formally perpetuated centuries-long beliefs about supposedly natural, social and political hierarchies based on anatomy. These beliefs manifested themselves in the overt exclusion of the black body from lunch counters, the front of public buses, public schools, and other facilities

³ Michel Foucault. “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 785.

⁴ *Ibid.*

throughout the South. This legal and ideological structure of segregation was the political and cultural condition in 1960. It was the racial hegemony.

Critiquing the Jim Crow status quo, the civil rights establishment concentrated on the slow process of political evolution through policy and judicial initiatives. With *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Little Rock school integration, the exigency of segregation gained increasing national attention. By 1960, traditional forms of persuasion via the state became increasingly difficult, but a counter-hegemonic consciousness had emerged. Blacks throughout the South organized more and effectively cultivated the need to remedy the enduring quality of this problem.

Such structural segregation manifested itself in the Greensboro students' personal lives. In their regular "bull sessions," as they called them, the four freshmen often shared their experiences with segregation and goaded each other to do something about it. The students lived under a hegemonic division of culture, which perpetuated and undergirded juridical domination, and they talked themselves into challenging it. To gain inclusion in segregated spaces, Paul Wehr observed at the time, paradoxically required that students highlight their "racial identity, the very mark upon which [their] exclusion is primarily based."⁵ (11). With their bodies, they confronted the subjugation of their bodies. The Greensboro Four challenged conventions of racial hegemony and consequently transformed themselves and their conditions.

In February 1 at t 4:30 pm, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair entered F.W. Woolworth's.⁶ After buying a few small items at the non-segregated

⁵ Paul Ernest Wehr, "The Sit-Down Protests....A Study of a Passive Resistance Movement in North Carolina." (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1960), 11.

⁶ What happened on that winter afternoon in Greensboro? Accounts vary. The interpretive intricacies of each version easily could lead to distinct conclusions and different analytic directions, but

counters, the four sat down at the “whites only” lunch counter. One of them asked for a cup of coffee. As expected, the waitress replied, “Sorry, we don’t serve colored here.” Their bodies are identified by race. He responded, “I beg to disagree with you, but I was just served at a counter three-feet away.” His retort confirmed the rational contradiction. The waitress pointed to the stand-up counter and said, “Negroes eat at the other end. You won’t be getting any service here.” She pointed out what was hegemonic common sense and walked away, but the four students remained sitting and waited to be served. Their presence sustained a rupture in the space’s customary ritual. Attempting to mend the hegemonic code of behavior, a black woman working at the counter approached them and commented, “You boys are getting yourselves into a lot of trouble. You know you’re not allowed here. You’re acting stupid, ignorant. That’s why we can’t get anywhere today.” Determined, the four students remained sitting. A crowd gathered outside the store like an audience watching a staged performance. Two policemen entered and walked behind the four in an intimidating fashion. The four students expected to be arrested, but they were not. Bringing segregation “into sharp focus,” as the first editorial regarded their action, they remained sitting. Not allowed in, a photojournalist’s pictures from outside the storefront captured the event for dissemination and public notation. The four students remained sitting until 5:30, closing time, when they returned to campus. Only an hour

such difficulties will inevitably plague criticism of corporeal advocacy (see below). Some reconstruction of events on that day is necessarily helpful to get a sense of what was to come. Most of the following historical details come from William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); William Chafe, “The Greensboro Sit-ins,” *Southern Exposure* 6, no. 3 (1978): 78-87; Miles Wolff, *Lunch at the Five and Ten: The Greensboro Sit-ins*. (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1970); Fredric Solomon and Jacob R. Fishman, “Youth and Social Action: II. Action Identity Formation in the First Student Sit-in Demonstration,” *Journal of Social Issues* 20, no. 2 (1964): 36-45; Michael Walzer, “A Cup of Coffee and a Seat,” *Dissent* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1960): 111-120; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

passed, but it was enough to quell their fears of immediate and violent reprisal. The next day, over 30 young men and women entered. On the third day, all but three of the 63 seats in the lunch counter were taken by students with student of all of the local colleges represented. By Saturday, almost the whole enrollment of A&T and Bennett was ready picket or sit, but late in the day, a bomb threat served as justification to close the lunch counters. Certain that they had communicated their message, Greensboro students accepted a two-week "cooling off" period, but on Monday students in Winston-Salem and Durham became the first of many to emulate the sit-in demonstrations.⁷ Spreading to Charlotte and Raleigh and then to South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, Southern students were on the move.

Bodies marked with blackness punctured a space reserved for the white body merely by sitting. After verbally confirming the ideology of segregation that manifested the hegemonic meaning of the space, students intervened where they were taught that their bodies should not be. Defying existing norms of decorum, students' civil disobedience made it obvious that they no longer consented to the status quo moralities of segregation. They imagined a new subjectivity and consequently experienced a transformation of character making sense of their world differently and altering the premises of its practical wisdom.

Youth

Despite confronting racial hegemonies, civil rights movement organizations maintained by practice, if not by thought, another hegemonic force that pervaded society. As most in the civil right movement knew, for example, few indications mark subjugation more than the

⁷ Not only were lunch counters targets, but so were "parks, swimming pools, theaters, restaurants, churches, interstate transportation, voting registration, libraries, museums, art galleries, laundromats, employment, beaches, and courtrooms." Southern Regional Council, "The Student Protest Movement: A Recapitulation September 1961" (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Council, 1961), 1.

inability to vote. In the American story of suffrage movements, however, age is usually forgotten. In 1960, most young people were not full citizens. During an entire decade of young people demonstrating political consciousness and engagement, most 18-year-olds were not constitutionally guaranteed the right to vote. In most states, twenty-one was the voting ages. This condition reflects not only the legal condition but the hegemonic idea that young people lacked the knowledge and were too immature and irresponsible to be competent decision-makers.

Abiding by the norms of age, young African-Americans usually deferred to a civil rights movement led by their elders who emphasized traditional tactics for seeking justice through education, litigation, petitions and boycotts. Organizations such as the NAACP had a "Youth Council" or other subgroups in which young people could participate, but they were still relegated to participation in, and guidance from, the adult leadership. Richmond, McCain, Blair, and McNeil had been members of these 'Youth' groups, and their political consciousness was shaped in that ideological home of the civil rights movement. However, the four teenagers grew frustrated with the position to which they were subjected. Rather than wait for cues and direction from adult leadership, the Four acted on their own and therefore acted counter-hegemonically, no longer consenting to adult supervision of their political activities.

Taking the reins of rhetorical action, these four young activists claimed the mantle of leadership by adding direct action and confrontation to the movement's nonviolent repertoire, and consequently changed themselves and the character of the civil rights movement itself. Civil disobedience was a rhetorical tactic radically different from the modes of public address deemed appropriate by the adult leadership of the civil rights movement. The sit-ins were, as Louis Lomax titled his Harper's article, "The Negro Revolt against 'the Negro Leaders.'" Though the quartet had past memberships with these 'Youth' affiliates, the catalytic events in

Greensboro were, as Lomax suggests, “more than an attack on segregation”;⁸ they expressed a frustrated need for action. The day after the initial sit-in, Ezell Blair, Jr. made their distinction clear: Black adults “have been too complacent and fearful. It is time for someone to wake up and change the situation, ...and we decided to start here.”⁹ His “someone” would be young; his “we” are the college students. Meeting in their “bull sessions” apart from the parental sight of established groups, the Greensboro Four expressed frustration about the situation of segregation with direct action, “something Negro leadership organizations consistently counseled against.”¹⁰ The generational divide clarified through their corporeality. Students were willing to put their bodies on the line; the older adults were only willing to offer their money and resources.

Their decision to act alone is not the only evidence revealing this hegemony. Identifiable leadership was in the hands of young people. At least fifteen separate sit-in campaigns occurred before 1960, but were based on adult organizations’ planning.¹¹ (Morris, 1981). They were as nearby as Durham in 1958 and as far away as Oklahoma in 1957. Although many were successful, the momentum never spread beyond a particular city. The contrast between the isolation of each preceding campaign and the explosion of the Greensboro campaign suggests that something beyond the struggle to counter act racial hegemony was at work. Leadership of these rhetorical performances in the explosion of subsequent sit-ins was characteristically

⁸ Louis E. Lomax, “The Negro Revolt Against ‘The Negro Leaders,’” *Harper's Magazine*, June 1960, 41.

⁹ quoted in Wolff, 32.

¹⁰ Lomax, 41

¹¹ Aldon Morris, “Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization,” *American Sociological Review* 46, (1981): 744-767.

young. The momentum of continued youth leadership actively engaged in the civil rights struggle eventually prompted the formation of an autonomously civil rights organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a pillar of the movement in subsequent years. Breaking with the adult driven leadership practices of previous sit-ins, the 1960 explosion of youth-run sit-ins leading to SNCC exhibits a transformation.

Within a few years, the character transformation within the civil rights movement became evident as young people were on the front line of civil rights activism from the Freedom Rides of 1961 to the Children's Crusade in the 1963 Birmingham demonstrations. Invigorated by activism that adults were too timid to pursue, the civil rights movement was not the same. Despite remaining disenfranchised, young people claimed political power and became citizens.

Student

A century before the Greensboro Four took the stage at the lunch counter, Cardinal John Henry Newman justified "the idea of a university" to Anglo-American publics beginning to invest in the promises of higher education.¹² In those addresses, Newman articulated what would become the norms of education that positioning students as children, cloistered on campuses preparing for the real world but not participating in it. Becoming the ruling ideas of the ruling class, the idea that colleges and universities acted in lieu of parents, *in loco parentis*, literally established rules that made their school another home to protect students but also to which students would be subject. Engaging their communities directly, students in Greensboro took risks beyond their academic home and therefore challenged the character of what it means to be a student in that home.

¹² John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University* (Garden City: Image Books, 1959).

Prior to the sixties, black students seem to have consented to this childlike, privileged and apathetic identity. Eminent black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier characterized the black student in his 1957 book, *Black Bourgeoisie*, "Negro college students may very well be the most complacent Negroes in America, for a good number of them are already headed toward the higher-status positions with higher educational status which will help to place them there."¹³ In the campus newspaper only three days before the Four took a seat, Carl Bullock bemoaned, "The student body of *A&T* has been plagued by this 'don't care' attitude. It has been one that has been perpetuated or increased with every passing year."¹⁴ In the years prior to 1960, similar editorials from frustrated student advocates easily could have appeared in college newspapers across the country. After February 1960, such arguments would not work because the radical presentation of immense numbers of politically engaged student bodies could not be ignored. The character of students across the country began to change.

Not long after they started, news of the Greensboro sit-ins struck, wrote Howard Zinn, "a special chord of repressed emotion, and excitement raced across the Negro college campuses of the South,"¹⁵ and, as Jack Newfield put it, "quickly jolted Northern campuses out of a decade's silence and sloth."¹⁶ The idealized, universalized, indentured, sheltered student identity was the hegemonic character with which students broke in order to formulate a new morality. With the sit-ins, *students* were on the move.

¹³ Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 41.

¹⁴ Carl E. Bullock, "Complacency Plus You Equals Nothing," *The Register* (Greensboro, NC), January 29, 1960, 2.

¹⁵ Zinn, 18.

¹⁶ Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1966), 40

With the sit-ins, students asserted their agency as students. They took leadership, became active participants rather than supportive followers, and risked themselves. To maintain the standing as forerunners of change, the demonstrators made sure “to keep the movement a ‘student movement’.”¹⁷ Non-student, elder representatives¹⁸ from already established civil rights organizations traveled about the state documenting, encouraging, and participating in demonstrations. However, the character of the movement remained student-led and student-organized: “‘We are willing to listen to what people like [Gordon Carey of CORE] have to say,’ said one [student] leader, ‘but we are going to keep control of this thing ourselves’.”¹⁹ Others in the black community understood the centrality of student identification. Local minister Otis Hairston felt, “that this was the students’ movement, and he did not want” to hinder their efforts.²⁰ Distinguished from other organizing, the Greensboro sit-ins forged identification among African-American students throughout the South. One Shaw University student recalled, “We began to think about it, and the more we thought the more we saw ourselves in relation to” the Greensboro sit-in.²¹ “When we discovered that the kids in Greensboro had made a move, we felt we were obligated to show our hand,” Marzette Watts, a student at Alabama State University.²² Students felt the call to act because they were students.

¹⁷ Wehr, 28.

¹⁸ Reverend Douglas Moore, member of the SCLC from Durham, had organized the 1957 sit-in and sought to help shape the movement of sit-ins. Knowing their coordination of sit-ins since the 1940s, Dr. George Simkins, the Greensboro NAACP Chapter president, called CORE, which sent Gordon Carey to assist.

¹⁹ Wehr, 28.

²⁰ Wolff, 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²² *Ibid.*, 59.

While the demonstrations defied expectations, students maintained their association with the conventional student identity. On the second day of the sit-in, over 30 men and women from A&T entered in jackets and ties, white blouses and skirts, which is what Todd Gitlin calls sit-inners' "uniforms of respectability," but which was also the traditional attire for "good" college students.²³ In addition to dressing in the respectable garb of a serious student, they often brought books and studied while waiting for service. Their representation of studiousness further emphasized their studentness, especially in contrast to the young white hecklers. Although most were officially students, these so-called ducktails rarely are referred to as students in the historical record. Challenging the students' claim to scholarly diligence and attempting to evoke ideological self-discipline, one editorial in the Greensboro Record questioned the amount of time students spent protesting versus studying. This editorial illustrates the hegemonic understanding of the proper place for the student in public participation, which was not to participate. Through juxtaposing performances of activism with studying, the sit-inners linked a traditional image of the book-learning student with a nonconformist political activity.

Their position as students privileged them with more free time and fewer obligations and personal responsibilities. At the time, Ezell Blair, Jr. observed that "as college students we have no jobs from which to be fired by people who don't like to see us assert ourselves... We can speak up loudly now without fear of economic reprisal."²⁴ Although Blair and others felt immune, risks were certainly present for students. They risked their grades, their potential

²³ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

²⁴ quoted in Chafe, *Civilities*, 132.

careers, and their status as students.²⁵ At Alabama State, for example, Marzette Watts and eight other students were expelled for leading a subsequent sit-in demonstration. At least 141 students (and 58 faculty) were dismissed from their respective institutions,²⁶ but students often showed remarkable solidarity. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, over 230 Southern University students boycotted classes after the dismissal of several sit-in leaders.²⁷ Greensboro foreshadowed such student-university confrontations.

Although the sit-in protests were not directed at the university, administrations in Greensboro were called upon to respond. Their responses illustrate another site of struggle over public attitudes regarding students. "A&T was different" from other HBCUs, writes Miles Wolff; it did not shelter or coddle their students like Morehouse or Fisk, but rather treated "the students like adults" with "little attempt to control their activities."²⁸ Similarly, President Hutson of Greensboro College suggested "that [its] students were acting as individuals and that their activities as individual citizens were not connected with the college"²⁹ ("Movement"). However, North Carolina's Attorney General and gubernatorial candidate Malcolm Seawell typified the *in loco parentis* attitude regarding the sit-ins by suggesting that "colleges heads have the duty of acting somewhat as parents toward the students under their care."³⁰ Women's

²⁵ Only one of the original four Greensboro sit-inners maintained their grades and graduated "on time."

²⁶ Southern Regional Council, 3

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Wolff, 69.

²⁹ "Movement by Negroes Growing," *Greensboro Daily News*, February 4, 1960, A-1

³⁰ Guy Munger, "Sit-In Protests Are Assailed by Governor," *Greensboro Daily News*, March 11, 1960, A-6.

College of Greensboro Chancellor Gordon Blackwell exemplified this position for the university in the most extensive reflection regarding students' sit-in participation in a "Talk to Student Assembly." Although Blackwell emphasized the importance of students' independent decision making, the three protesting students from the College were threatened with expulsion and confined to campus.³¹ The women were free to search for solutions through the staid rationality of liberal education, but the imposed limits on that freedom were always present. The minds can engage the issues as long as their bodies remain docile. If not, then those unruly bodies can be removed. From this moment, students tested the limits of that relationship, eventually turning on the institution itself. But, that is another story.

Born out of Greensboro, the character of the political student multiplied in the public lexicon. Even though most students in the sixties were not politically active, no longer could students be seen as complacent, immature and irresponsible children being prepared to enter the world. The Greensboro sit-in enabled thousands of students to imagine a new morality for themselves as students and to foster a powerful influence in the politics of the South, the country, and eventually the universities from which their identity as students drew meaning.

Conclusion

The Greensboro sit-in of 1960 began transformations in character along the lines of race, age and institution. Morally inspired and inspiring, these students transgressed the normative ideologies to which they once consented and, consequently, transformed public assumptions about the characters they embodied. By way of a conclusion, I would like to propose two ideas.

³¹Connie Thornton, "Woman Recounts UNC-G Chancellor's Threat." *Peacemaker*, February 8-14, 1990: 4-5.

First, the characters embedded in the ideas of race, youth and student are not independent. One of the difficulties of such an analysis, in this circumstance, is that each subjectivity was interdependent and worked in combination. If any one of the positionalities were not part of Greensboro Four's counterhegemonic challenge, then it may not have provided the spark of transformation. In fact, I would propose that the overpowering influence of interpellation to maintain hegemonic subject positioning may well have prevented the spread of sit-ins' transformative identification. In other words, if the Greensboro Four were perceived as just black, just young, or just students, then the hegemonic power of interpellation could have limited the imagination of others who did identify with them. The limited scope of influence from previous sit-ins affirms that conclusion. The multifaceted quality of moral character created a counterhegemonic configuration able to overcome the self-disciplining subjugation inside their heads. An empowered and resistant black identity, in other words, enabled potential activists to transcend their subject positions as youth and student and imagine those subjectivities differently. While it is often a virtue of effective communication, the simplicity of singularity may also provide a means to reinforce and maintain hegemony by allowing traditional ethos to stretch without breaking. To break hegemony, perhaps, we must break out of the singularity of an identity politics toward a multiplicity of identities not only to enable coalition politics but also, and more importantly, to break out of the ideological bubble of hegemonic discourses that suggests how we should think of ourselves and others.

Second, transformation is not confined to one time and one place. Although we may like to think the moments of epiphany or conversion of character, changes are constant. The transformation in character that the students sparked relied on existing subjectivities and was not complete when they stopped sitting in or when the lunch counter was desegregated. Instead, we might think of the "promotion of new forms of subjectivity," as Foucault

suggested,³² as an always already incomplete process of becoming. It might be better to think of Greensboro Four's transformation as a shift in trajectory rather than something that happened and was done. Young black students were no longer the same, but they kept changing. Normative perceptions of race, youth, and student may have changed, but they kept changing. In other words, character formation is never complete, and neither are the homes in which they take shape.

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³² Foucault, 785.

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