In the long battle for racial equality, wrote Victoria Gray Adams, white segregationists typically thought that “if you controlled the men, you got the rest of them covered.” But this community organizer and political leader from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, realized their mistake: “They didn’t know the power of women.”

*Hands on the Freedom Plow* keeps reminding us about the power of women. Its fifty-two personal narratives from workers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) stand as more than a collection of experiences; they are an achievement. Edited by SNCC veterans Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, the book gathers the voices of women who provided the civil rights movement’s backbone. It provides an instructive and even inspiring example, lending its readers a sense of empowerment.

We learn about the diverse nature and experiences of SNCC women. They were black, white, Latina, northern, southern, young, old, urban, rural, religious, secular, liberal, radical, idealistic, and cynical. We meet women such as the white southerner Joan Mulholland, who attended Tougaloo College and joined the Freedom Rides because “integration shouldn’t be a one-way street.” We meet Prathia Hall, who joined the Albany Movement in southwest Georgia because “it was God’s work and also my sacred calling.” We meet Gloria Richardson.

*Continued on Page 2...*
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Dandridge, an adult working mother who led the movement in Cambridge, Maryland—a tough and dedicated organizer who gained strength from courageous local students, as well as the example of Malcolm X. And we meet the editors themselves, such as Judy Richardson, a soft-spoken African American woman from Tarrytown, New York, who illustrates the journey of SNCC women as she embraces the organization’s “circle of trust,” draws inspiration from Gloria Richardson and freedom songs and Africa, berates FBI men and convinces airline towers to delay flights, comes to see politics as less about morality than about power, and endures confusion and disillusion as SNCC splintered in the mid-1960s.

“The women of SNCC were tough-minded yet sensitive, grounded in a vision that freedom was not only external in terms of defining a space in the SNCC collective and larger society, but also internal in terms of defining who we were as females,” writes Gwen Patton in the concluding essay. For all their myriad experiences, the contributors to this accessibly written, impressively organized volume share an expansive vision of freedom that communicates the ideals of the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change.

In this inaugural effort to revive its Book Award, the Hooks Institute received over thirty nominations. The other four finalists were Maurice Berger, For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights (Yale University Press); Blair L. M. Kelley, Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson (University of North Carolina Press); J. Todd Moye, Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II (Oxford University Press); Thomas Sugrue, Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race (Princeton University Press).

A panel of five judges representing different disciplines and Memphis institutions made the difficult decision of choosing the winner. The panel comprised Dr. Femi Ajanaku, Associate Professor of Sociology at LeMoyne-Owen College; Dr. Aram Goudsouzian, Associate Professor of History at The University of Memphis; Dr. Charles McKinney, Associate Professor of History at Rhodes College; Dr. Ladrica Menson-Furr, Associate Professor of English at The University of Memphis; and Dr. Wanda Rushing, Professor of Sociology at The University of Memphis. The judges and the Hooks Institute congratulate the editors and contributors of Hands on the Freedom Plow, as well as the University of Illinois Press, for this book that advances understanding of the American civil rights movement and its legacy.

—Aram Goudouzian, PhD

The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change
at the University of Memphis