

Building Bridges to Empower a True Majority: The South by Southwest Experiment

by Leroy Johnson, Genaro López-Rendón, Mónica Córdova, and Louis Head

The far right is putting up a tsunami of resistance in its attempt to reverse gains made by people of color over the past 50 years. We must fortify and anchor now so that we may move forward after the tide has washed over us. We are presenting this case study as an example of one way that grassroots organizations are maintaining and advancing a position reflective of those gains, while making an important contribution to movement building in the face of the challenge.

Racial justice is a fundamental part of any path to social justice in the United States, and it will only be attained to the degree that structural racism and accompanying social inequality are addressed. People of color will become a collective new majority of the U.S. population by 2040. This demographic shift provides a basis to transform the country, provided that we can become capable of the kind of *struggle* that is necessary for transformation. In order to overcome historic structures of domination and control, organized communities of color and low-wealth communities must become architects of policy and build a *true majority* capable of building and exercising power to bring about real change. This will require not only a clear and strategic analysis of structural racism, but also new forms of collaboration that can build accountable leadership and organizations.

The forms of domination that emerged in the 20th century took different shapes in both the South and Southwest, but bore similar results for people of color. Segregation and racially exclusionary practices, according to historian Eric Foner, developed “as a complex system

of White domination, in which each component – disenfranchisement, unequal economic status and inferior education – reinforced the others.”¹

Notwithstanding the success of movements to end the legacies of slavery and colonization – legal segregation and the most overt, hostile forms of racial exclusion – structural inequalities remain. Indices related to education, unemployment and underemployment, segregation, political disenfranchisement, and land loss are remarkably similar for African Americans and Latinos – and worse for Native Americans – in the two regions. Furthermore, many argue that the conditions in the South and Southwest provide the foundation for lowered economic standards that are now being applied throughout the country.²

The histories of the American South and Southwest underscore the development and growth of both *de jure* racial segregation and structural racism. The two regions have long histories of struggle against distinct versions of racial oppression. Still, the comparisons between those fights and current conditions create an opening for creative and strategic shared work among grassroots organizations in communities of color. One interesting new collaborative development can be found in the work being done by the South by Southwest Experiment (SxSWE).

The South by Southwest Experiment

In 2005, grassroots community organizations responded to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina by sending organizers and members to affected areas in the South via the Gulf Coast Justice and Solidarity Tour, led by Southwest Workers Union (SWU) of San Antonio, Texas. This collaborative project allowed participants to demonstrate unconditional solidarity with affected African American and indigenous communities of the Gulf Coast, and prompted SWU leaders and those of two other participants, Southern Echo of Mississippi and the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) of New Mexico, to reconvene. Over several days in Mississippi in 2006, they

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shared their organizational histories, which include specific campaigns that have long named and challenged structural racism.

For example, SWOP made a name for itself in New Mexico and throughout the Southwest during the 1980s by developing a practice of environmental justice organizing. It continues to work on environmental and public health concerns, and focuses much of its attention on food justice and youth rights. SWU grew among a base of low-wage public school workers in San Antonio, Austin and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, and has won countless victories for better wages and working conditions in that “right to work” state. Like SWOP, it engages in environmental and food justice efforts, and more recently began to organize domestic workers in South Texas.

Southern Echo was founded by veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi and has made its mark working on public education funding in the Mississippi Delta. Southern Echo works to end the “school-to-prison pipeline” by developing progressive policies related to school discipline, and by increasing the grassroots participation in census and redistricting work throughout the state.

The gathering in 2006 of SWOP, SWU and Echo leaders lifted up the visions of each organization as part of a broader movement for racial justice. The differences in the conditions in New Mexico, Texas and Mississippi were obvious, but the recognition of the similarities of those conditions helped organizers understand the possibility of collaboration among their organizations. In order to build a solid foundation, they avoided identifying a set of issues on which to work and instead proposed an intentional process of interaction so their members could be full protagonists in defining the relationship. They called their partnership the South by Southwest Experiment, in recognition of the cross-regional character of the process and because of the fact that they would be testing a new methodology of work.

During 2007-08, a series of listening and learning sessions hosted in Mississippi, New Mexico and South Texas brought together 20 leaders and members from each organization. Participants exchanged personal and organizational stories, engaged in deep cultural sharing – the glue of relationship building – and began to develop a living curriculum by constructing a collective historical timeline of moments of importance to people of color.

Strong bonds between the organizations and their members, young and older, began to take shape.

Joining in Collaborative Work: The Struggle to Maintain and Strengthen Voting Power

The partners reconvened the following year to begin developing a program of work, agreeing to share best practices, with each organization contributing based on its strengths. Key issue areas were defined: promotion of accountable governance, organizing to ensure complete census counts, enabling communities to engage in redistricting efforts, developing a grassroots living curriculum, and strengthening youth leadership and sharing of intergenerational practice characteristic of each organization.

Over the years, members or allies of each partner organization have become involved in electoral politics, winning county commission, school board, city council and state legislative seats in the different states. The concept of accountable governance includes civic engagement, but raises broader questions regarding the transformation of how power is exercised. A key component is community participation in decennial census counts and the delineation of electoral districts based on the resulting data. With population numbers trending inexorably towards a “new majority,” conservative forces have counted on redistricting efforts to diminish the impact of the Black and Latino vote, and to grow or maintain largely White Republican majorities in state houses, as well as in the House of Representatives.

In the decade to come, many House districts will see continued upward movement in the numbers of voters of color, giving racial justice organizations all the more reason to pay close attention to attempts to blunt that emerging majority. At stake is the distribution of billions of dollars in government funds for public services and infrastructure, as well as the ability of a community to be represented in a manner that best reflects its interests. Without voting power, district and statewide races will continue to result in more policies that support structural racism, which is why both the fight for fairly apportioned districts as well as efforts to prevent systematic voter disenfranchisement are important racial justice strategies.

Since its founding, Southern Echo has made the U.S. Census and redistricting process central to its work.

Echo-led coalitions have provided training and legal assistance to organizations working on both the census and reapportionment of congressional, state legislative and county commission districts. Their successes at the state level have dramatically raised both Black voter turnout and Black representation in the Mississippi legislature, along with numerous school boards and county commissions, thus providing a useful model for this work on a larger scale.

Prior to the South by Southwest Experiment, SWU and SWOP had not engaged in either census or redistricting work. So Echo conducted trainings for them on the census and redistricting – and their relationship to fair representation and voting rights – as well as changes in the laws and rules regarding minority vote dilution and communities of interest under the Voting Rights Act. SWU and SWOP staff and members completed courses of study in geographical information systems development and the creation of electoral district maps. SWOP and SWU then involved their members and allies in first-time, large-scale “Complete Count” census campaigns during 2010, and conducted efforts last year that enabled affected communities to engage in municipal, county and school redistricting efforts. The process also helped Echo expand its reach in Mississippi and broaden its definition of “communities of interest” where applicable to be inclusive of both African Americans and Latinos. Echo credits this partnership with helping to expand its perspectives.

Sharing Our Experiences with Allies

The South by Southwest Experiment is presently conducting a series of three national-in-scope convenings entitled “Building Bridges to Empower a True Majority” in order to share its methodology, further its understanding and practice of accountable governance, explore the potential for broader collaborations with entities outside of the partnership, and to assess conditions and priorities following the 2012 U.S. election cycle. The first two convenings, held in November 2011 and July 2012, have involved large numbers of members from each partner organization, as well as representatives of dozens of community and worker organizations from throughout the country, national policy and advocacy organizations, and public officials with strong ties to the grassroots. Important sectors of philanthropy have also participated by providing needed financial support, but just as importantly, have been engaging fully in the process, including sharing their perspectives on funding work to address structural racism.

Reflecting on grassroots organizing and capacity building, SWOP Co-founder Jeanne Gauna once said that “there is genius in the ‘hood.” However, she knew that we can never fully develop this genius unless there is a transformation of the nature of our relationships with national organizations and foundations. The collective capacity of grassroots agents of change in the American South and Southwest must be greatly increased through new regional and national partnerships and collaborations. Such relationships should be bottom-up, allowing grassroots partners to define their work based on their own interpretations of their histories, present day conditions and cultural realities. Efforts that overcome regional, historic, cultural and racial barriers to build unity among people of color and low-wealth communities are a part of this process.

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¹ Foner, Eric, and Joshua Brown. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. Print.

² Solís, Rubén. “The South and Southwest Labor-Worker Question.” San Antonio, Texas: Universidad Sin Fronteras, 2011. Print.

S x SWE Youth Organizers Speak Out

The South by Southwest Experiment (SxSWE) is strengthened by its youth leadership, which includes Lizdebeth Carrasco (SWOP), Monica Ramos (SWU) and Kameisha Smith (Southern Echo). Both Liz and Mónica have been organizing since their sophomore year in high school. Kameisha began organizing way back in the fifth grade. The three young women talked recently with Lori Villarosa about their experience with SxSWE.

Lori Villarosa: *What were some of your initial reactions or observations when connecting with the peer organizations that are part of the South by Southwest Experiment?*

Kameisha: I asked myself, “What are we going to have in common?” But once the discussion started, I realized we shared the same history. We’re fighting for the same things. It was an eye opener to me because, before South by Southwest, I never interacted with people of races other than Caucasians.



Mónica: My first experience was back in 2009. It was my first time leaving San Antonio, and in Jackson (Miss.) there were only African Americans. I was not used to that, but it was great because they took us all in like family.

Liz: We did the People’s Freedom Caravan to the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010, and those of us from New Mexico and Texas met up with the people from Mississippi and received them by chanting. This celebration of being together created a feeling of solidarity between us.

LV: *Was there a particular “a-ha!” moment for you, something that made a difference in how you thought about this work?*

Kameisha: For me, it was during the People’s Freedom Caravan in 2010. One night we stopped in Louisville to spend the night and the hotel staff was, I’d say, racist. The New Mexico and San Antonio groups checked in first and had no problems. But then the hotel made the Mississippi youth sign forms saying that we would not cause any trouble. The service was just hostile. The next morning we all joined in a protest in the lobby and it was so amazing because I had never protested before. We worked together. I found that it didn’t matter if we were Black or Brown. We stuck together. That’s when I learned how connected we are.



Liz: One of the principles that South by Southwest goes by is trying to create bridges between communities of color. I had always heard that, but I never really understood it. Engaging in that protest was really exciting because I realized that we were doing it in solidarity with other peoples’ struggles, not just our own.

Mónica: That was the first time in my own experience where everyone was all together. We stood united as a family to show the hotel service the way they received our comrades was wrong and we were not going to take it. That incident made us stronger and strengthened our bonds.

LV: *What have you found most valuable about your experience with South by Southwest?*

Liz: Learning how to share best practices. SWOP has good communications and facilitation skills. The people in Texas mobilize well and know how to put on a protest. In Mississippi they have good skills around the census and areas of work like that. It is just a really good balance, so we learn a lot from each other. And we have actually been listened to and not just tokenized for being young.

Mónica: The whole reason for the South by Southwest Experiment is not because we organize in the same way, but because we are all different and we all bring something to the table. That’s how you learn new things. We learn about each other, which is how you keep a connection going. You’re not just focused on the organizing; you’re working on the relationship too.



Kameisha: There are times we work extremely hard and get things done; but we take time to reflect on our work, our accomplishments and our history, not just as SxSWE but as a people. I think what I have learned more than anything else from this experience is that it’s really important for us to be in a space where we are not just local, but we are doing something regional – something huge.

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