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Hope in the Midst of Apathy: *Liberation* magazine and the covers of Vera Williams

Alec Dunn

In 2009, *Signal* was still in its conceptual stage. Josh MacPhee and I had yet to publish an issue, and only had vague aspirations about the contents and the physical size of this journal. At the time we were taking short research trips and casting wide nets, trying to see what was out there and what stuck. In the summer of 2009, we visited a semi-private archive which doubled as a barn attached to a vacation house in the mountains of Northern California, five miles from any town, with an amazing and exhaustive collection of international anarchist material. A friend dropped us off along with enough supplies for the weekend: food, cameras, a scanner, and a couple of laptops. Josh and I set up in different corners of the barn and did the tedious and joyful work of archiving: digging through boxes, flipping through books, documenting, and scanning.

“Look at this,” Josh said at one point, and I poked my head up from the scanner to see him holding up a large, old, magazine with a woodcut masthead and an abstract cover. “Hmmm, cool,” I mumbled and turned back to work. We repeated this exact exchange a few times until I finally got up from my ad hoc work station and we both started unpacking a box containing many issues of this magazine called *Liberation*. At first glance, *Liberation* contained a surprising blend of modern anarchist thought and first-hand civil rights reporting and theory. The magazine was dated from the 1950s— a time period when the anarchist movement was widely considered to be dead (or at least deeply comatose) and when the Civil Rights Movement was gaining steam. And it was surprising to me because, at the time, I knew of no connections between the Civil Rights Movement and anarchist organizing. But what was most surprising, surrounded by 150 years of radical cultural publications and books, was the look of *Liberation*. We were immediately struck by the vibrancy and, honestly, the occasional oddity of its cover designs. They were bright things, eye-catching, and showed small variations due to being hand printed. The covers showed a thoughtfulness and intellectual playfulness that was unusual for left wing periodicals of that era (or this era for that matter). And then sometimes the covers wandered off into unbridled abstraction, no bounding box,

no listed contents, no obvious political message, just a dense pattern of color and light with the masthead and a date. We took pictures of the magazine, and added it to a growing list of items to follow up on.

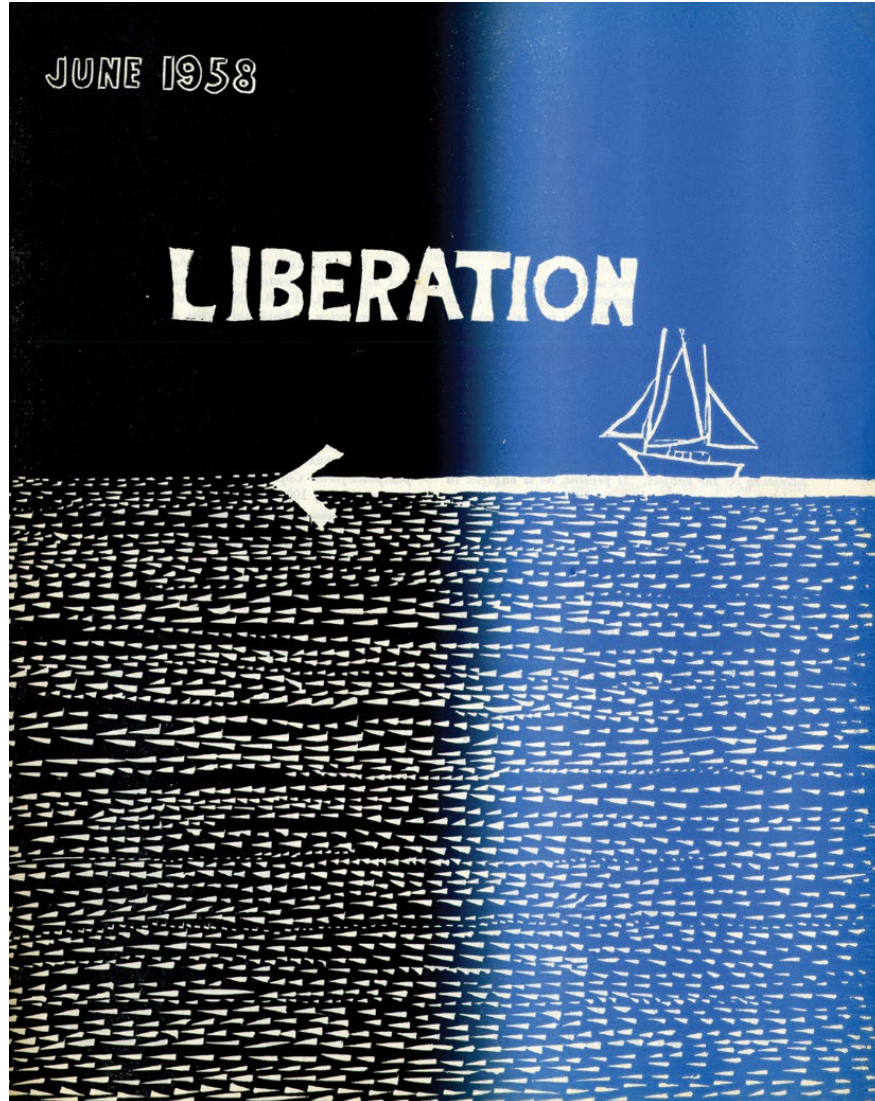


Figure 1: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, June 1958

During a meeting in 2015, now with four issues of *Signal* under our belt, we again talked about tracking down more information about the magazine. Josh had some contacts who mentioned the name of Vera Williams as a War Resisters League activist who was also the primary cover artist for the first decade of *Liberation*, the years with the best covers. I agreed to follow up and while digging around online a short while later I, sadly, found a very recent obituary.

It is impossible, then, to discuss the covers of *Liberation* with Vera Williams and elucidate her process and approach. I am lucky that her life is well-documented in other arenas, and I am able to put enough pieces and fragments together to construct a narrative and context for her involvement with the magazine. In the process of doing this, I was continually astonished with the depth and complexity of her life; her involvement with art and with “Art,” with anarchism, pacifism, communalism, protest, and with literature. And I was also taken aback by the ways these seemingly disparate fields evolved, overlapped, and interweaved in McCarthy-era America. In a 2008 interview, oral historian Connie Bostic said to her, “You’ve had quite a life,” to which the then 81-year-old Vera Williams laughingly responded, “I’m still having it!”¹

This article is about *Liberation*, a leftist magazine founded in the mid-1950s, and also about one of its primary cover artists, Vera Williams. It seems strange to point out what something is not, but in this case, it is important to note that *Liberation* was part of the radical non-communist left. The Communist Party USA, with its strong base in American labor was the dominant left movement in this country in the mid 20th century. But its suffocating culture of conformity, its top-down organization, and its dubious Cold War machinations stifled growth and spontaneity. Subsequently, right-wing attacks on rooting out American communism decimated the traditional labor-based American left. In one sense, what remained after these inquisitions were elements of the movement considered to be too far outside of mainstream white-supremacist power structures to be of consequence: pacifists, Civil Rights activists, anarchists, and artists.² You couldn’t really blacklist these people because there was nothing to blacklist them from, they had never been allowed to occupy any positions of power! One of the unintended consequences of the destruction of American communism is that it opened up a space for more liberatory and experimental movements to grow and develop.

Liberation was built out of alliances made between Civil Rights organizers and pacifist conscientious objectors to World War Two. It was physically printed by commune-living activists, weirdoes, artists, and homosexuals in a highly conformist 1950s America. Because of these convergent streams, *Liberation* was uniquely positioned in this uncertain and fearful era to explore new practices and strategies in the struggles for freedom, peace, and justice.

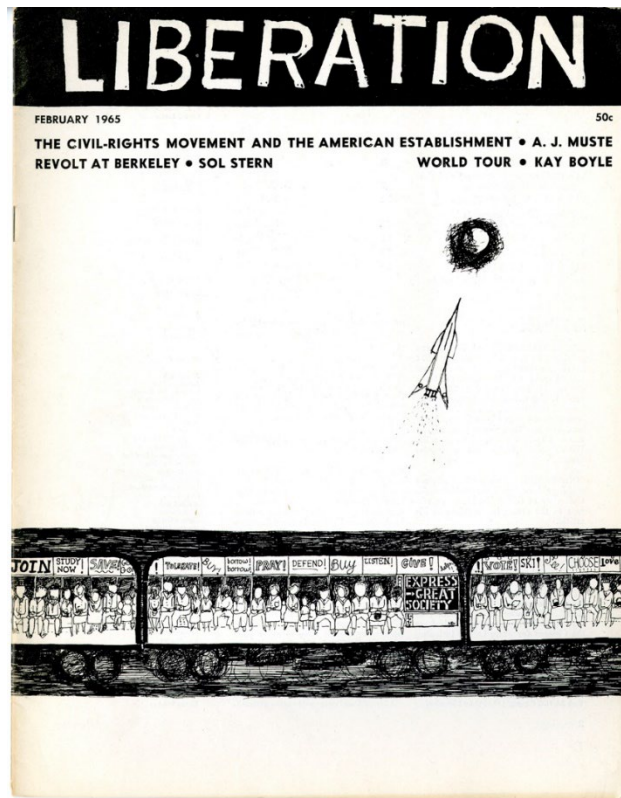
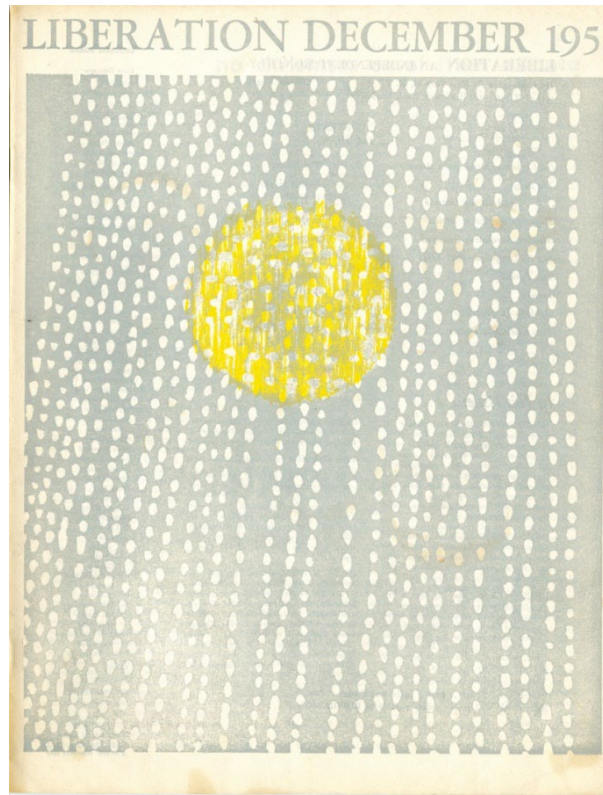


Figure 2: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, December 1958

Figure 3: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, February 1965

Vera Williams (née Baker) was born during the Great Depression in 1927 and grew up in New York City. Williams was the daughter of working-class Jewish radicals, a red-diaper baby. As a child, she recalled attending protests, standing on street corners with a tin-can to raise money for Republican Spain, and going to anti-eviction/re-housing actions with her parents. She had a natural affinity towards art that was nurtured by her parents and she attended free Federal Art Project classes for youth in the Bronx during the New Deal.

Upon graduating from high school in 1945, Vera Williams enrolled in an arts program at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Black Mountain was an experimental college founded in 1933 by left-wing educators in an attempt to create a holistic learning environment that blended arts training, humanities education, democratic decision making, and physical labor. It attracted many well-known artists and experimentalists as both faculty and students, including M.C. Richards, John Cage, Ben Shahn, Buckminster Fuller, Jacob Lawrence, and, importantly for Vera Williams, Josef and Anni Albers—faculty members of the German Bauhaus who fled Germany after the seizure of power by National Socialists in 1933.³ Williams loved the rural environment of Black Mountain, for a teenager from New York City farm life to her was both alien and romantic. She also thrived in the experimental curriculum of the school, and innately fell into the rhythm of discipline, labor, and play that was encouraged there. She credits the rigorous direction of Josef Albers, who was her primary instructor and graduate advisor, as a primary influence:

“I was eager to do everything when I got there. I took weaving with Anni Albers. Thread and string drives me crazy, but I loved the interaction and the colors. I took drawing and painting and design and color, all four subjects that Josef Albers taught. He cared about the visual aspect of everything, to the extent that you might say it was an aesthetic autocracy, what color could be painted, what lettering could be used on the college... you know from the Bauhaus there was this attention to every aspect of modernism—even like the tableware, everything was thought about—that art applies to every area of life.

There was no one who taught printing at the time, but a few of the students revived

this abandoned printshop. We activated the presses, and then after the war we got a new press from the government. My graduation project was in the graphic arts. As a child I had painted very colorfully, I loved color, but I became very drawn to black and white, to the Expressionists and to wood cuts, which was possible to do there with our small means. So as part of my project, I designed programs and menus used by the college. There was an entertainment committee that made decorations and I invented signage for different events. I did a lot of that. It was just wonderful the way things were connected there.

[My job at Black Mountain was that I worked in the] morning in the milk room. I loved it. I lifted those heavy cans, learned to make butter and cheese, and lived on heavy cream—which was an ambition from childhood! During vacation we had too much milk, we didn't have a contract to sell it, so I don't know how I got this idea—I had sent for publications from the government about milk and making cheese, and I found out you could make paint from milk, so we made milk paint and painted the whole huge dining room with it. It was milk, whiting, lime, and something to keep it from turning sour and smelling nasty. It was a pretty runny kind of paint, kind of a whitewash. Here I was 19 or something, a kid from the city, but I just did this, and they let you! They let you do things and make mistakes.

There were people who came to Black Mountain summer sessions who influenced me greatly: Merce Cunningham, John Cage. Katie Litz who came to do dancing. I liked the theater very much. I did a little puppet show that I invented, in which I was the puppet. You could put your imagination into practice. It was very childlike in that way. The imagination that children have, if you let them pursue it, the playfulness, that was very much there, in the middle of a lot of serious struggles. While I was there a group, including Bayard Rustin and Jim Peck, people who were badly beaten over the struggle to integrate interstate transportation, came and talked about what they were doing and stayed overnight. There were two farmers there who were pacifists, and this was their alternative service during the war. All of that was going on at the same time as this work of play and imagination.

I came from a very political background, in which it was assumed in my life, as a

child, that you were interested in what went on in the world. That you were responsible, that things didn't just happen to you, that you participated in change. We were enthusiastic activists. That carried over very much into life at Black Mountain College.”⁴

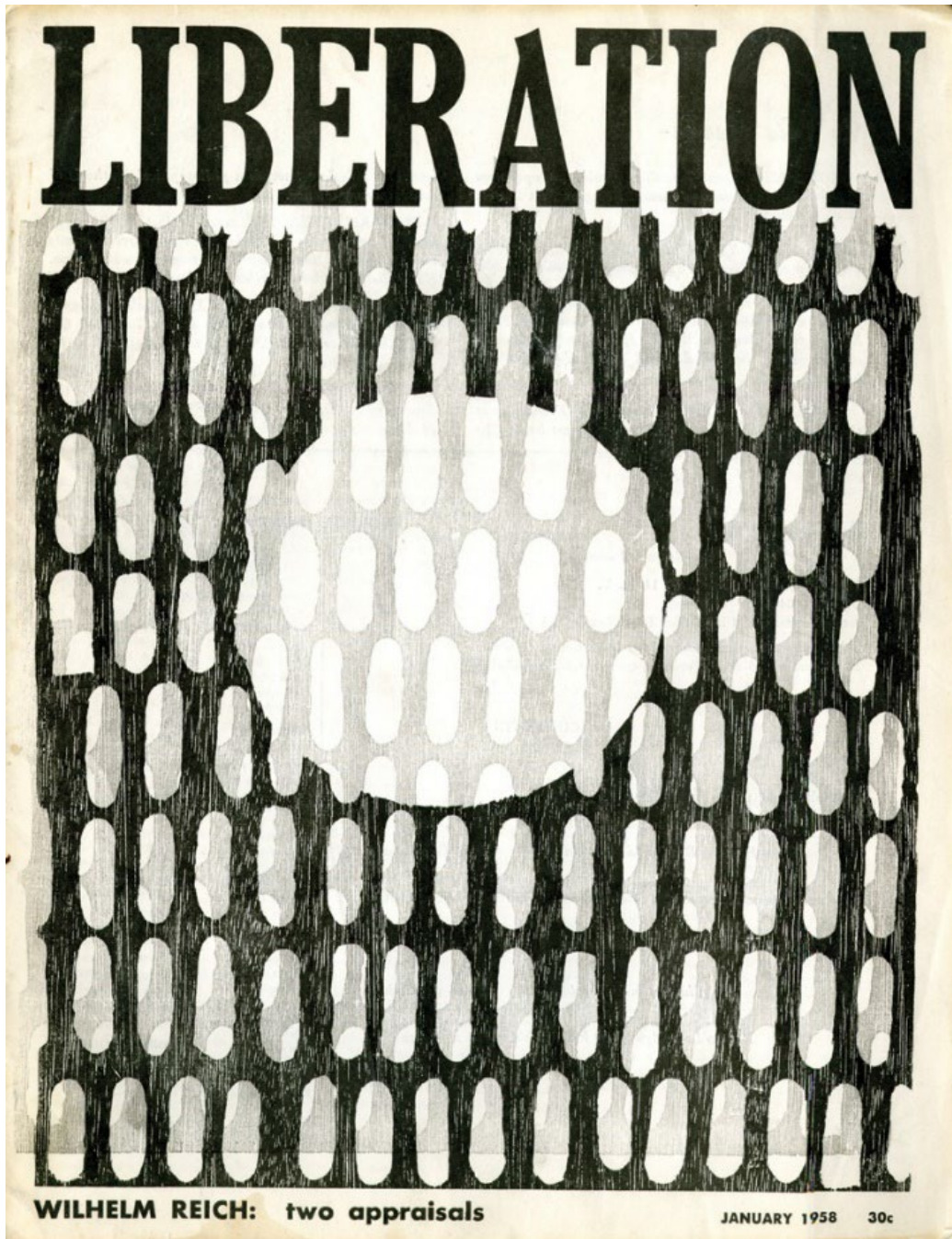


Figure 4: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, January 1958

While at Black Mountain she met a fellow student and young architect by the name of Paul Williams whom she married in 1949. Vera Williams graduated the same year, and the couple stayed on at Black Mountain (where Paul had become resident architect) until 1953 when they left the increasingly fractious and unstable institution.⁵ Paul and Vera Williams, along with other Black Mountain alumni and faculty, began searching for a new place to continue experiments in creative collectivity. In 1953 they purchased a 116 acre piece of land about 30 miles north of New York City in the Hudson Valley. It was dubbed the Gatehill Cooperative. The goal was to create an intentional community with an emphasis on creating space for artists, craftspeople, and musicians. Paul Williams designed Gatehill as a small, dense, village. The austere and boxy buildings showed Williams' aesthetic debt to the Bauhaus (particularly the architect Walter Gropius who had taught summer sessions at Black Mountain); while the overall layout of the community, thoughtfully built around squares and workshops, was a practical example of the anarchistic rural/urban design theorized in Paul and Percival Goodman's 1947 book *Communitas*.

"We were very much influenced by Paul Goodman, who came in the summer. He was highly argumentative, a polarizing person, but full of ideas! Very interesting ideas about how we could have an urban and country life, how we could be a community. He talked about things like how the chairs were arranged in a meeting and what it meant. It just made you think about where should the houses be, how should they face each other, what does that mean in how people will talk to each other and so on. Paul Goodman was on the advisory board for our school, which we later started—a very disorderly elementary school where many wonderful things went on. Both Black Mountain and Gatehill Cooperative were more educational than you could bear sometimes! But because they were so open and honest in a way, you were subject to a lot of struggle with self, with other people, with philosophies, and things that didn't work. And that was part of your education."⁶



Figure 5: Vera Williams in her garden at the Gatehill Cooperative (circa 1959). Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Vera B. Williams Trust. Digital reproduction courtesy of Mark Davenport/Landkidzink Image Collection.

Gatehill Cooperative carried on the interdisciplinary approach of Black Mountain, with the idea that creating artwork, cultivating land, living collectively, and rearing children could, and should, be interconnected. Permanent residents of the Gatehill Cooperative included composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, experimental

filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, potters M.C. Richards and Karen Karnes, as well as Paul and Vera Williams (amongst many others) and functioned as an important node for Judith Malina and Julian Beck of the Living Theatre.⁷ Frequent visitors were a who's who of modern art luminaries including such notables as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Jasper Johns, Richard Lippold, and Robert Rauschenberg.

While living there, Vera Williams became a regular contributor of artwork to *Resistance*, a post-war anarcho-pacifist periodical that was physically printed by David Dellinger and Igal Roodenko at the Glen Gardner Cooperative, a Christian Pacifist commune sixty miles away in New Jersey.

Meanwhile, A. J. Muste, a former pastor and labor activist, gathered together a small group of radical pacifists to work on a new magazine with the intention to bring focus to revolutionary non-violence, movement building, and civil rights.⁸ The founding editorial board, consisting of Muste, Sidney Lens, David Dellinger, Roy Finch, and Bayard Rustin, had roots in faith-based pacifism and were deeply involved in several resurgent left-wing movements. With funding assistance provided from the War Resisters League, *Liberation* magazine was founded as a bimonthly publication in 1956. Vera Williams, with her connections to the anarcho-pacifist *Resistance* group, started producing interior artwork for *Liberation* from the first issue.

"Liberation was printed in Glen Gardner, New Jersey, where Dave Dellinger lived, and they were trying to have a communal life there too. We were close to them and I used to go down there a lot. The first cover I did was for an article that Paul Goodman wrote about Wilhelm Reich. I was interested in that, so he asked me to do the cover. The next one I remember doing is when a little group sailed a sailboat into the Pacific to try to bollocks up the nuclear weapons test that was about to be held. They had a much larger printing press there, and I was able to be very experimental about the covers. I did woodcuts, I did drawings. I had a lot of freedom about what to do. And when the war in Vietnam was underway, I had been a longtime activist against the war, against nuclear weapons, and I was able to express that on the magazine."⁹

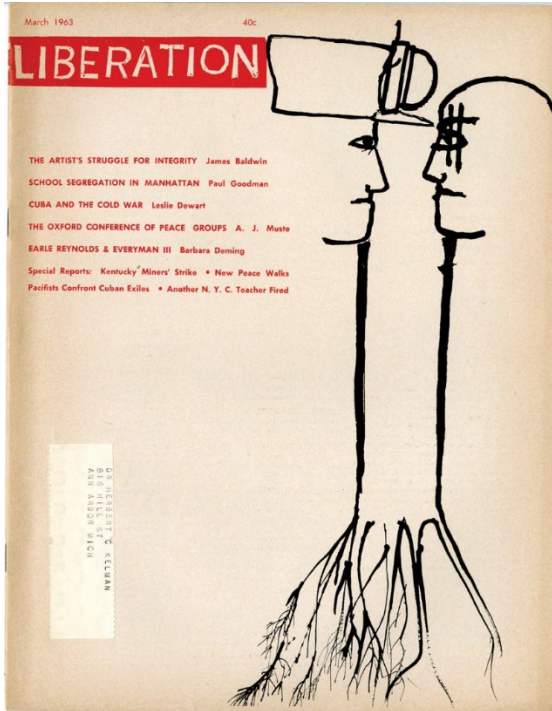
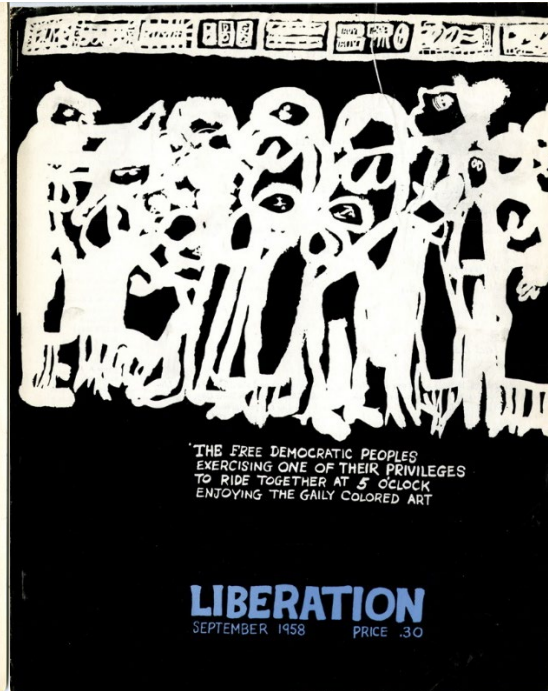
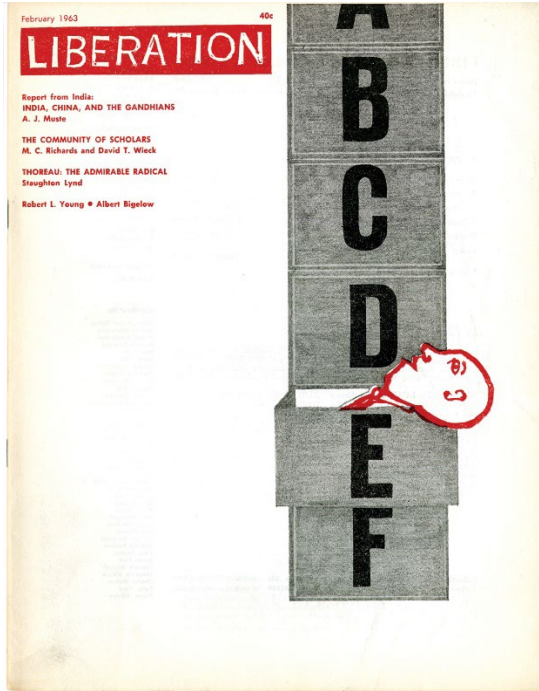


Figure 6: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, February 1963

Figure 7: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, September 1958

Figure 8: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, March 1963

Figure 9: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, June 1959

The table of contents of the first issue of *Liberation* typifies the tone of the magazine for the next decade. It contains an article by Vinoba Bhave about land redistribution in India, John Dickinson wrote about guilt in post-war Germany, Pitirim Sorokin about peace policy and hypocrisy, and Kenneth Patchen published poems and experimental pieces. Bayard Rustin was slotted for an article about the Civil Rights protests in Montgomery, Alabama but missed the deadline (the article was pushed to issue no.2).

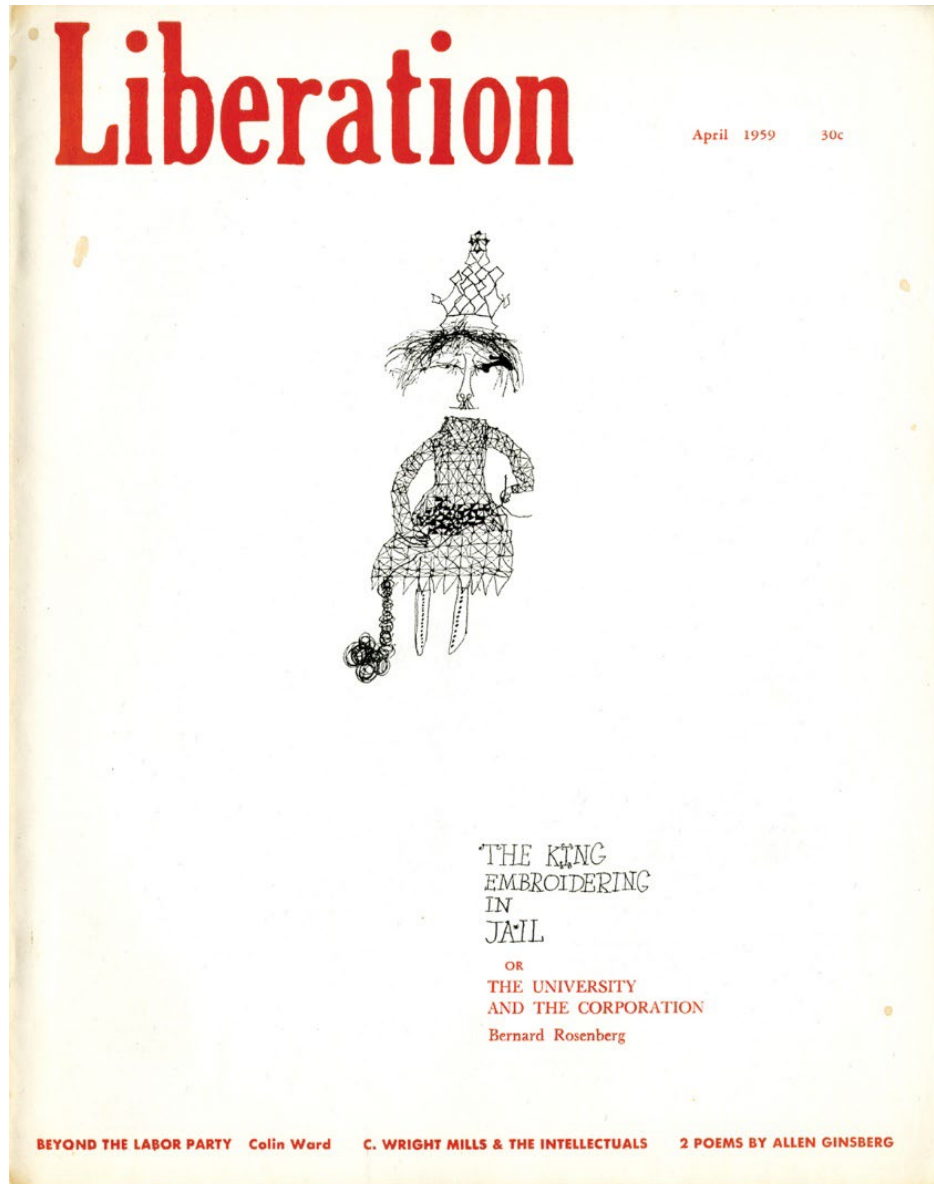


Figure 10: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1959

The second issue of *Liberation* featured a cover article about the Montgomery Bus Boycott by Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the previously mentioned article by Bayard Rustin, and *Liberation* became an early platform for first hand discussion and coverage of the Civil Rights movement. It was the first publication to print *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s defense of direct action and civil disobedience in the face of racism and it also included an early debate about revolutionary Black self-defense between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Williams.¹⁰ *Liberation* continued to be internationalist in orientation with frequent articles about struggles in Cuba, Europe, Africa, and India. It drew on both its religious and modernist roots to publish articles focused on the political inner life, nature and the natural world, and on the alienation of humanity under modern capitalism. Regular contributors included Paul Goodman, Dorothy Day, Staughton Lynd, James Baldwin, Kenneth Patchen, and Kenneth Rexroth. *Liberation's* basis in anarchism, particularly an ascendant strain of anarchism that was less based in labor struggles and more concerned with prefigurative politics and lifestyle, were plainly stated in an early editorial:

“It is *Liberation's* conviction that the personalist, libertarian point of view is the authentically practical and humane philosophy toward which many people are groping today. Great revolutions are made by ordinary men to die—and live—for a dream of brotherhood. Such moral readiness is nurtured by the example we set each other in the everyday contacts of life. The grassroots revolution must start in the traditionally neglected areas of daily life where we live, eat, work, communicate, and raise children. It is here that men develop the capacity for happiness, for sharing, and for resistance to the evils that beset our age. At home and on the job, as well as in world affairs, we must learn to say NO to those who would control and plan our lives for us. Similarly we must refuse to be part of a “revolutionary elite” which seeks to impose the good life on others. Let us begin to put our revolutionary ideals into practice. Let us invite others to join us in libertarian schools, non-authoritarian family relationships, and in decentralized, communal workshops.”¹¹

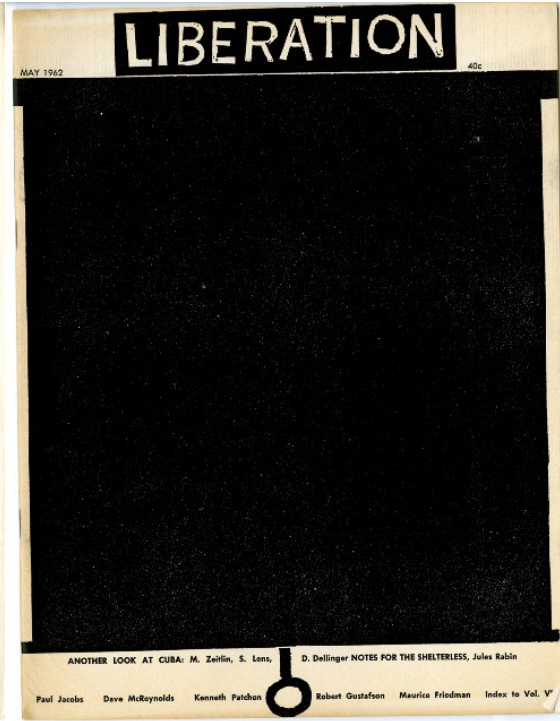
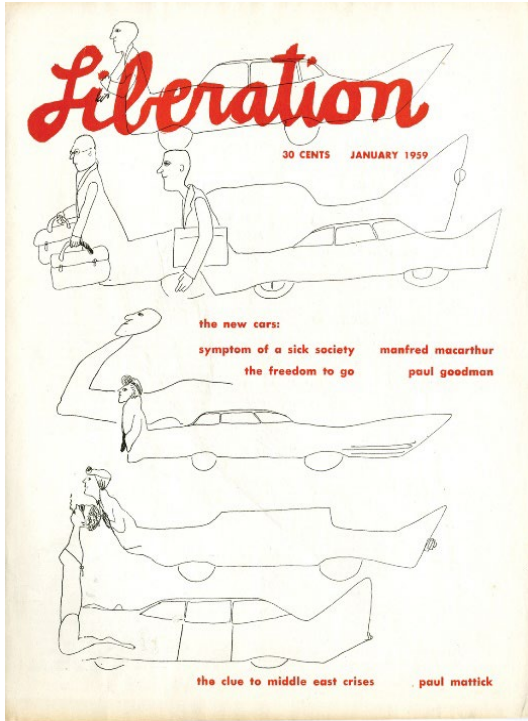


Figure 11: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, January 1959

Figure 12: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, May 1963

Figure 13: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, March 1961

Figure 14: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, October 1963

Liberation's printing press was located at the pacifist Glen Gardner commune, with the actual printing of the publication done by David Dellinger, Dellinger's wife activist Elizabeth Peterson, and Igal Roodenko (who along with *Liberation* editor Bayard Rustin, participated in the first Freedom Ride, *The Journey of Reconciliation*, in 1947, for which both Roodenko and Rustin were arrested and sentenced to time on chain gangs in North Carolina). The first ten years of *Liberation* show smart, if not overly ambitious interior design—minimalistic page layouts, cool typesetting, often accompanied by expressionistic brush illustrations. But the covers are another story entirely. Other leftist magazines used art and artists to enliven their covers, but *Liberation* had almost wholly divested itself from having cover artwork informed by the social(ist) realism common to artists of the left. Furthermore, no other magazine on the left had given over the cover so completely to such a creative spirit. Vera Williams, with her first cover in 1958, became the primary cover artist for the next decade of the magazine (and continued to produce inside illustrations as well).

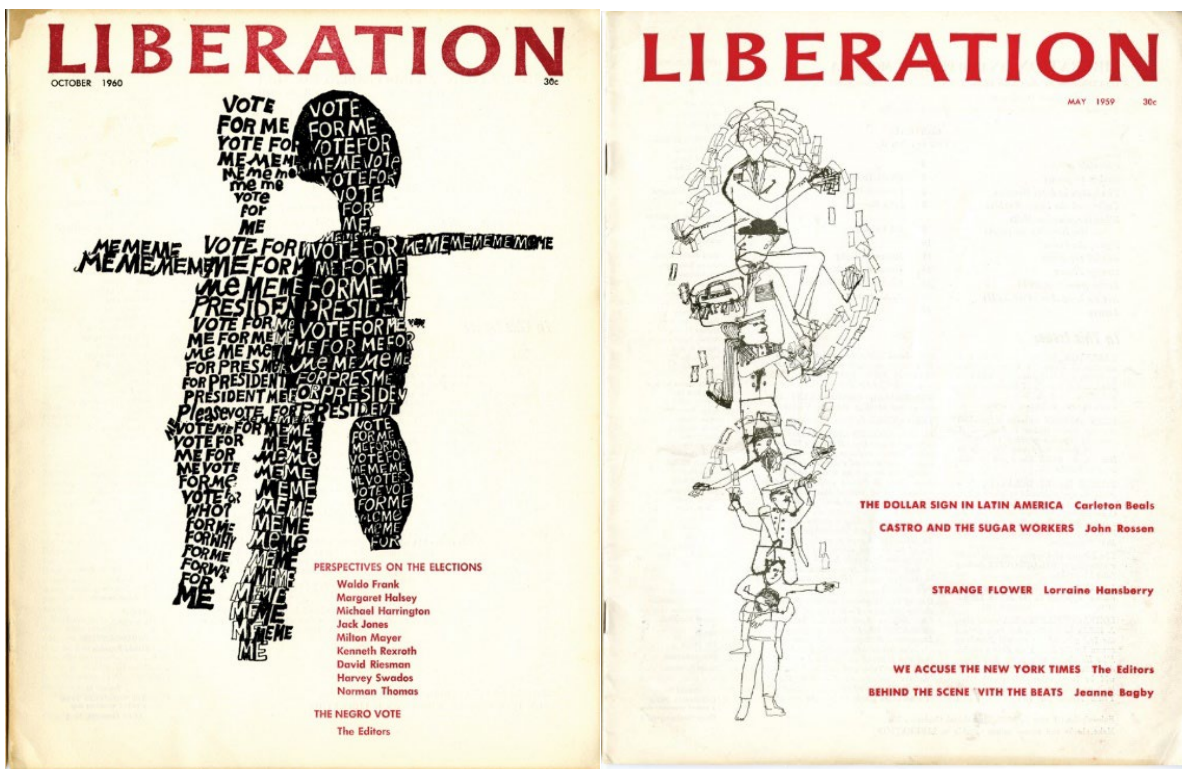


Figure 15: Vera B. Williams, *Liberation* Magazine Cover, October 1960

Figure 16: Vera B. Williams, *Liberation* Magazine Cover, May 1959

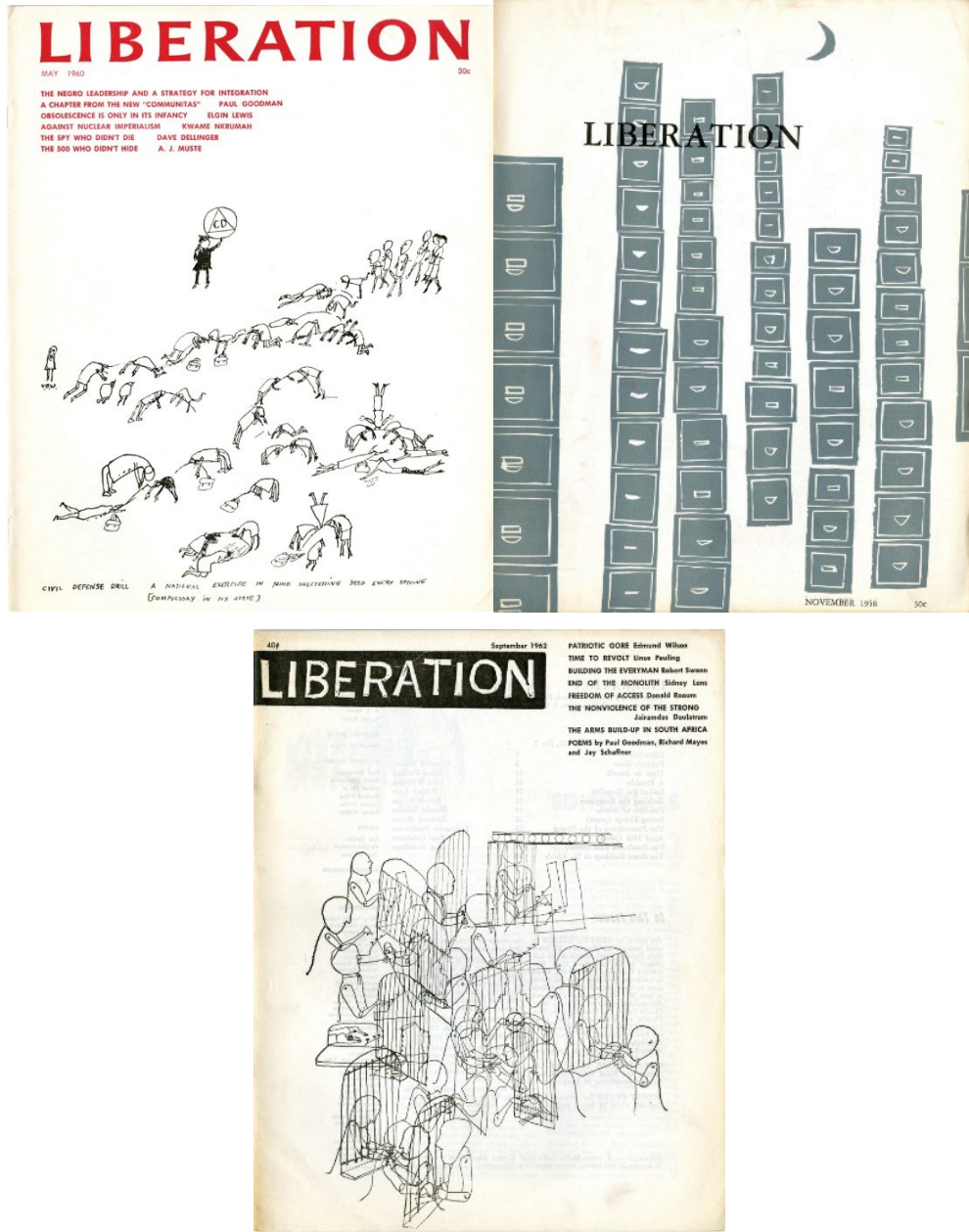


Figure 17: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, May 1960

Figure 18: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, November 1958

Figure 19: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, September 1962

The covers for *Liberation* evince a set of political beliefs that was affirming of life and struggle. They celebrate nature, children, women's work, education, peace, equality and criticize or satirize capitalism, racism, war, and imperialism. In general Williams' early covers are existential commentaries on modern life, the middle period covers look

increasingly towards Civil Rights, and the later covers, as the war in Vietnam accelerates, tend to focus on images relating to Vietnam or to the peace movement.

I will attempt to contextualize some of Williams' *Liberation* covers as best as I can. One impressive element is that she moves effortlessly between many styles and approaches to cover design. I recognize a spirit of collectivity in her work, one in which she purposefully shows influences and draws connections. And in researching some of her positions on education, art, and living, I believe it is safe to say that she considered the artist to be neither alone and cut off from the course of life, nor the central thinker in her own political discourse, but part of a greater movement.

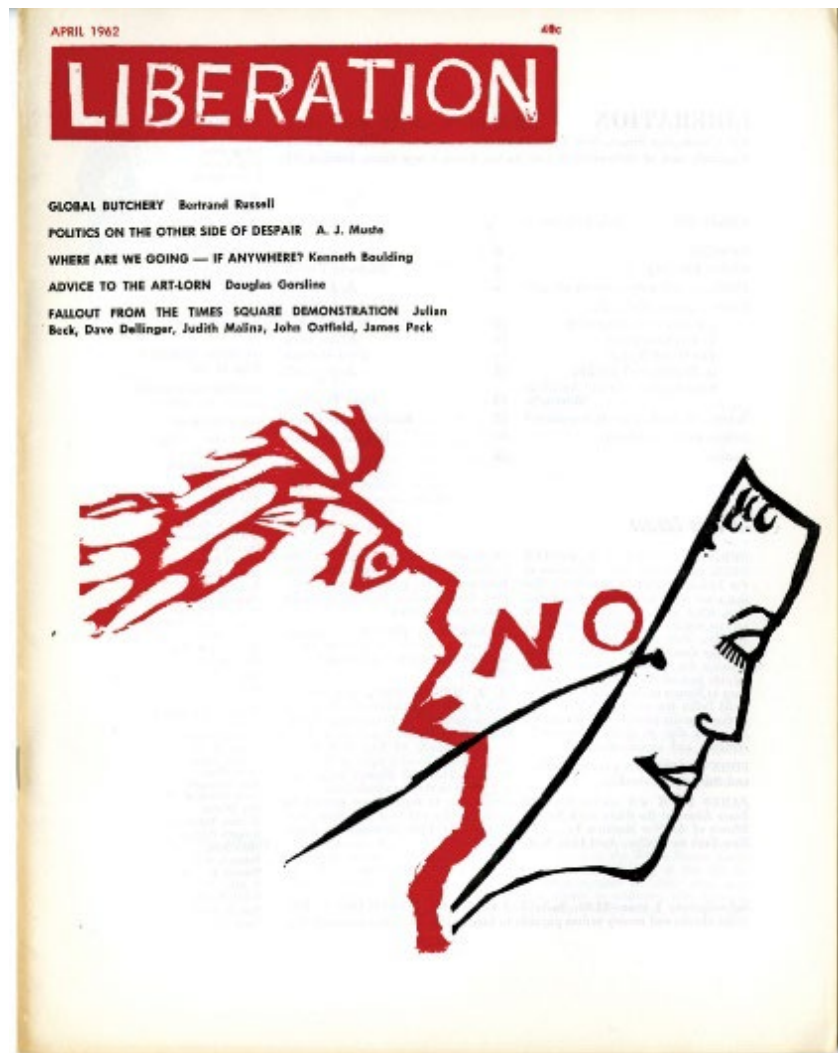


Figure 20: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1962



Figure 21: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, December 1962

Williams' early covers place her squarely in the school of European-influenced modern American artists. Her more cartoony covers show a debt to the German Expressionists' pointy and violently sharp lines and geometry. Her work is typically figurative, with some sense of realism or social import, but she also finds ways to play with abstraction, pattern, and color. The alienation of life under modern capitalism, as well as Williams' roots and continued proximity to New York City, reveal themselves in several of her early covers. The drudgery of urban commuting is shown on a September 1958 issue,

with the irony laden text, “The free democratic peoples exercising one of their privileges to ride together at 5 o'clock enjoying the gaily colored artwork,” showing a densely crowded subway car with one set of tired eyes staring at the advertising. A cover from a couple months later shows stacks of file cabinets resembling skyscrapers or religious spires with a small crescent moon hovering above them. On the January of 1959 cover we see automobile-businessman cyborgs, the fins of the cars looking predatory, for an article titled, “The New Cars: Symptom of a Sick Society.” May of 1959 shows a new take on the capitalist pyramid, also a premonition of Ronald Reagan's trickle-down economics, with business and the military on top throwing cash in the air as a dwindling supply of bills reaches the lowest level—a woman and child holding the whole affair up but receiving almost nothing. A later cover from February of 1965 revisits these themes, showing workers forced to ride underground surrounded by advertisements and exhortations, while a rocket is offered the freedom to fly into space.

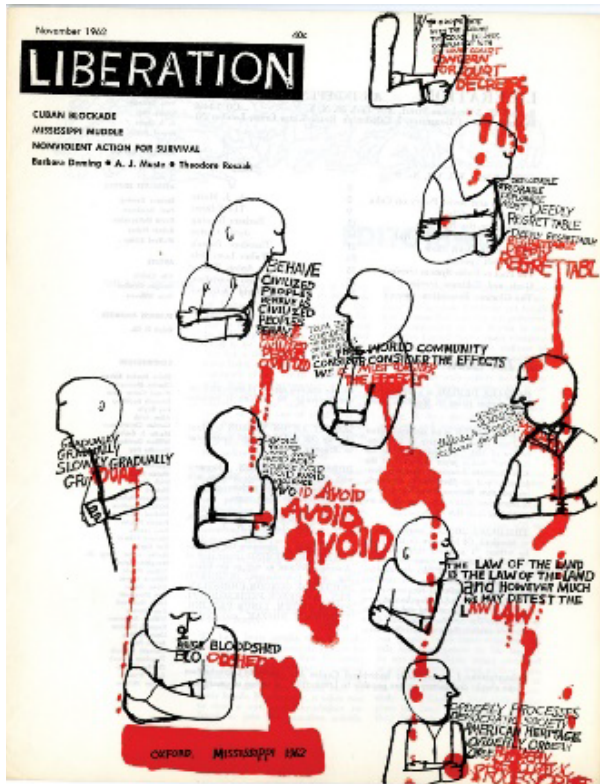


Figure 22: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, November 1962

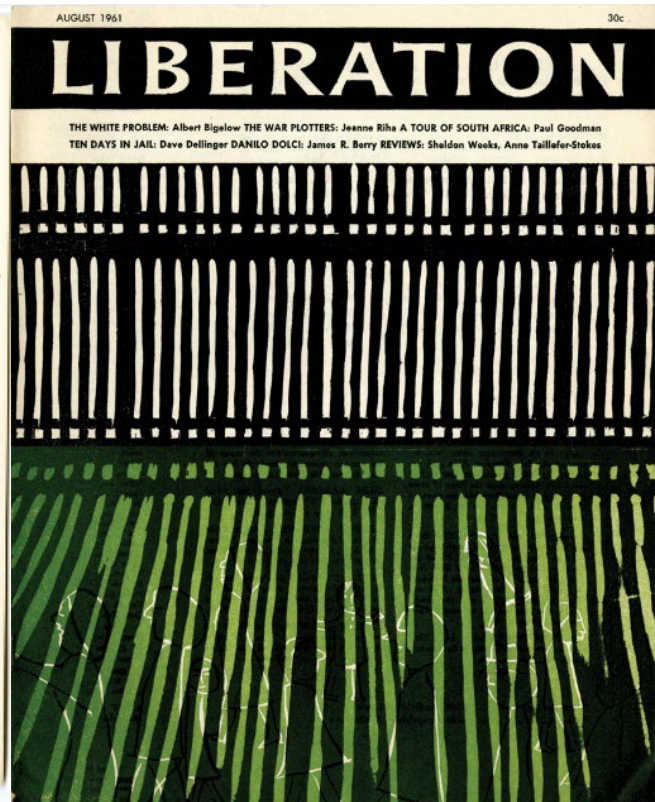


Figure 23: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, August 1962



Figure 24: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, October 1958

Figure 25: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, February 1959

Figure 26: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, February 1961

Figure 27: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, August 1964



Figure 28: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, Summer 1963

Figure 29: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, October 1963

Her first cover concerning Civil Rights appears in October of 1958, with an abstracted Black face and white face, the white face looking slightly menacing and unyielding to accompany an article about school desegregation for the feature *Report from Little Rock*. Similarly, we see a Black and a white child on the cover of the February 1959 issue, holding hands and staring at an exhausted looking woman. Black and white faces in semi-abstracted silhouette comprise the cover of February 1961 in a more nuanced image about race, acknowledging a variety of complex relationships. On the August 1961 cover, Williams composed an arresting image of the civil rights struggle, a mass of people moving together through the summer shadows of a fence. The image looks like a protest, but with the vertical shadows of the fence in the foreground, it carries the menace of imprisonment and repression. In November of 1962 we see a more pointed cover that illustrates the violence of white liberal gradualism, for an accompanying article about desegregation and the subsequent riots and murders at the University of Mississippi. The Summer issue from 1963 is the first cover about Civil Rights that really centers Black Americans in the struggle, by showing a large,

predominantly Black, crowd confronting the future with the word “NOW” woven into the mass of bodies. And there is a continuation of this on the October 1963 issue, which shows a similar crowd, breaking off into the air—fragile like birds, or growing like fire, rising up from the blood and bodies of martyrs underground. This arresting image accompanies an article by James Baldwin about the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. August of 1964 is another picture of interracial relations, showing spinning Black and white bodies holding on to an unstable center, holding on to one another (mostly, but not exclusively, whites holding whites, and Blacks holding Blacks).



Figure 30: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, November 1959

Several covers celebrate the beauty of the natural world. They don't tie-in with the subject matter of the magazine, but most likely reflect her and the publishers' rural

communal life and interests in naturalism. A particularly lovely cover during the autumn of 1959 shows a face and eyes looking upward with wonder, as leaves fall to the earth on a solid orange background. March of 1960 is illustrated with a verdant harvest print of leaves and cut fruit. September of 1960 is a dense and complex field of wildflowers and weeds. There are also a handful of beautiful abstract covers that play with pattern and tone, involving experiments with printing and color overlays (January 1958, December 1958, January 1961) that feel influenced by her schooling in weaving, pattern, and color.



Figure 31: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1961

Figure 32: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, Summer 1959

Figure 33: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, March 1960

Figure 34: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, September 1960



Figure 35: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, January 1961

Williams' 1960s covers increasingly focus on the war in Vietnam and are informed by her lifelong antimilitarism. In May of 1960, Williams depicts the threat of nuclear annihilation, showing a compulsory Civil Defense drill of people voluntarily falling en masse in the face of an atomic war, this normalized facet of American life depicted as both farce and nightmare. A beautifully simple drawing adorns the cover from April 1963, showing a small voice, a lone new mother's plea for peace as something elemental rising up through the earth, through her body and out into the world.

For her last year of covers, from 1965 through most of 1966 Williams placed the face of a Vietnamese girl on multiple issues. In a magazine with many unconventional covers, this is one of the more experimental choices, a running motif on successive issues; symbolic of the accelerating war, ever present to the American public though

sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground. In Williams' work the girl's face stands as a symbol for Vietnam itself and appears for the first time, on its own, surrounded by a field of white in April 1965. She is haunting and moonlike over a nighttime American cityscape later that year in December of 1965. She appears again in February of 1966, crushed under American combat boots, and in January of 1966 scribbled with the years of colonization and occupation of Vietnam across her face. In August of 1966 she is crying tears of rain on oblivious American flag umbrellas. In a later issue the same face is dead in the ground but supporting new life, she appears again in trees like new leaves in April 1966, and then as the sun in the Summer 1966 issue. We find her face again in the midst of a repurposed fashion advertisement, and then finally making an appearance amongst a group of American children protesting the war in March 1966.

The editorial board of *Liberation* underwent successive changes in the late 1960s and Williams' last cover was in 1966. The hardening of the New Left and the rise of the counterculture codified *Liberation's* covers into a more directly political, but also more staid, approach. *Liberation* stopped publishing in 1977, a remarkable twenty-one-year run.

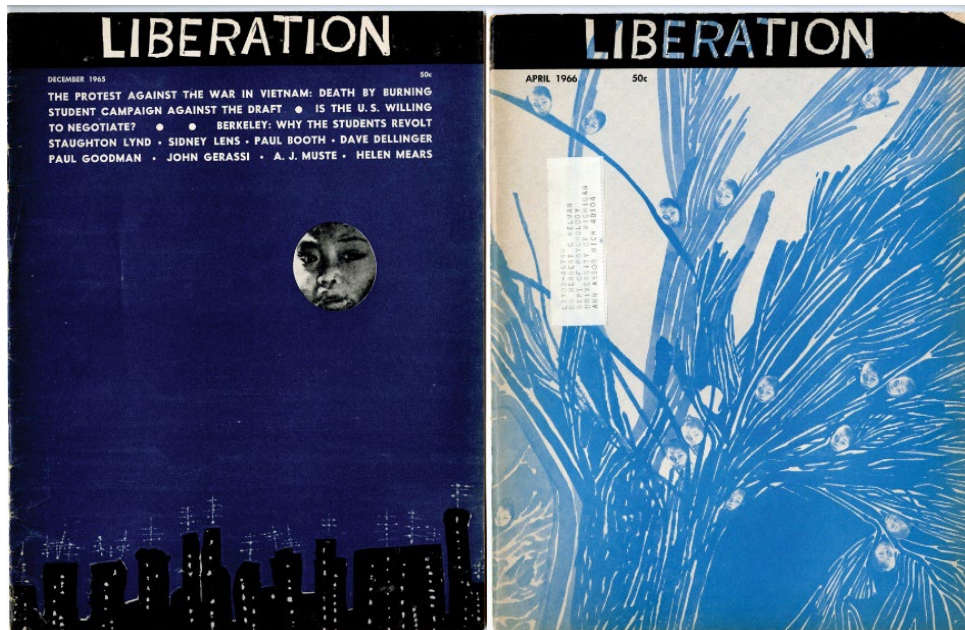


Figure 36: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, December 1965

Figure 37: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1966

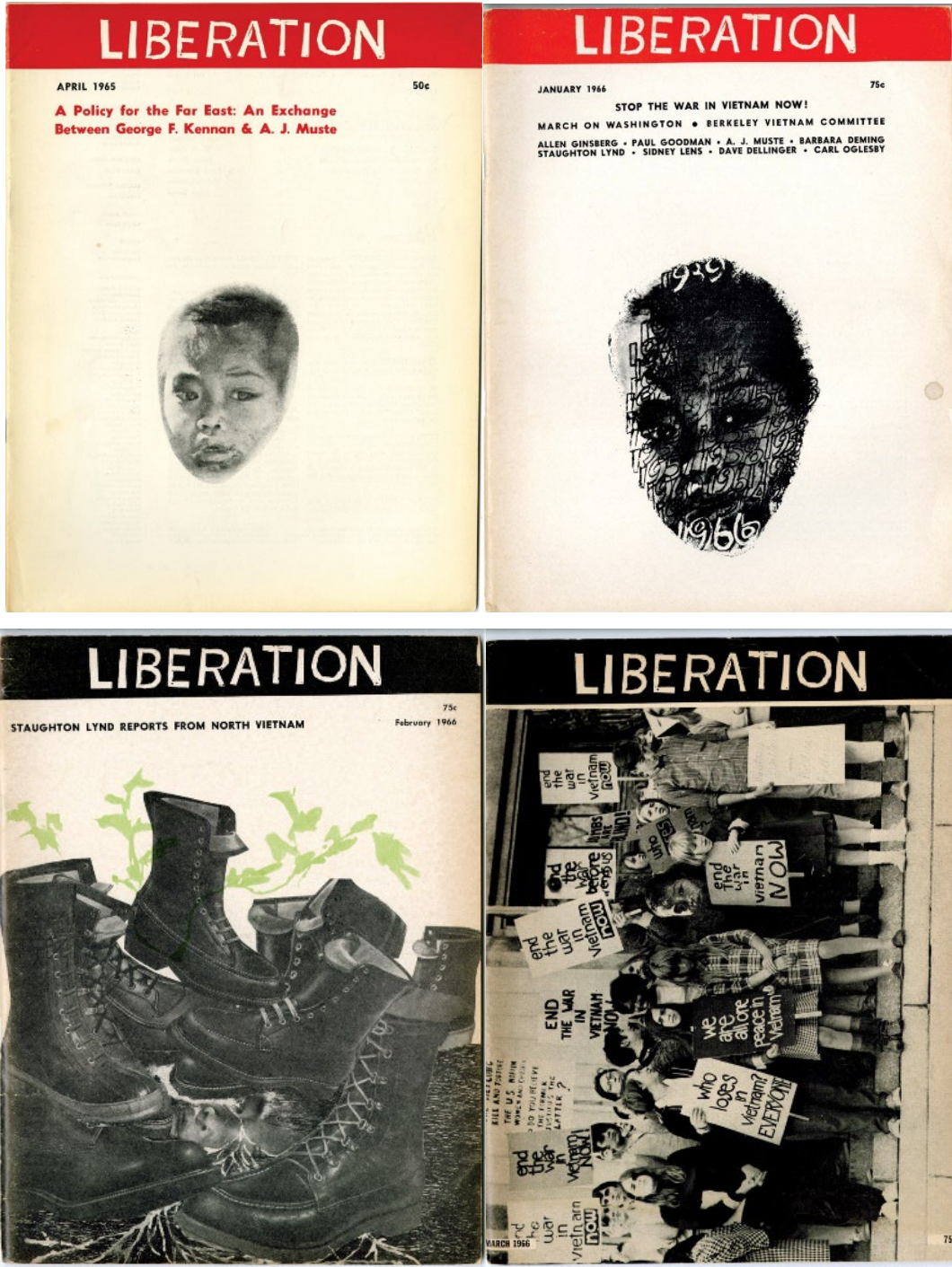


Figure 38: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, January 1966

Figure 39: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1965

Figure 40: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, February 1966

Figure 41: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, March 1966

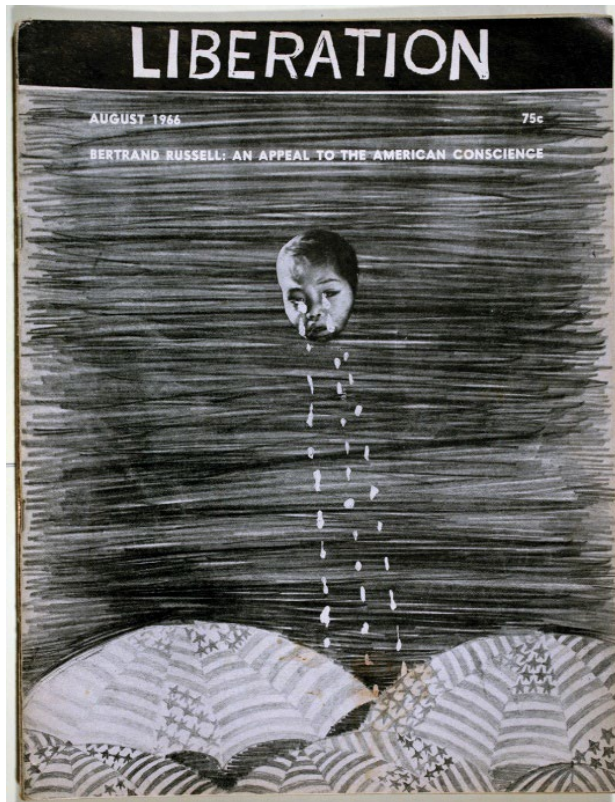


Figure 42: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, date unknown

Figure 43: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, date unknown

Figure 44: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, August 1966

Vera Williams remained active in antiwar and liberatory educational movements. As mentioned above, while at Gatehill she helped start and run an experimental elementary school, modeled after A.S. Neill's emancipatory Summerhill School in England. In 1970, newly divorced, Williams left Gatehill Cooperative and moved to Canada. At first, she worked in an experimental school in Ontario and later moved to Vancouver, British Columbia where, in 1975, she began writing and illustrating books for children, the body of work for which she is now most well-known. Her children's books often tell stories about young working-class girls. They emphasize boldness, generosity, color, and imagination. *A Chair for My Mother*, her most well-known book, tells a story of solidarity as a young family recover from a house fire.

After moving back to the U.S. in 1979, she continued to illustrate and write books for children, as well as produce drawings and artwork for the peace movement. In an interview with Black Mountain historian Connie Bostic, she recalls her participation in a 1981 feminist action against militarism:

“I took part in a group called Women's Pentagon Action to grieve and resist the amount of money and attention that was and is now, more than even then, being poured into war. We blocked the steps of the Pentagon, we wove them shut with ribbon (laughs) and the police cut the ribbons, so we threw more ribbons up. It was meant to be expressive of female interests. The author Grace Paley wrote a wonderful statement, she took the ideas of everybody and fashioned them into something called the unity statement. A lot of us learned it by heart, and we sat on the steps and chanted it, and many of us got arrested. I ended up going back to the South in chains, in a bus, to the Federal Prison in Alderson, West Virginia, where I stayed for a month. So I had a new educational experience. I don't want to make light of it, of what it would've felt like if I knew I would have to be there for years. But for a month it was remarkably enlightening, because unless you get sent to prison you don't know about it, and you still don't really know about if you're there as a white middle class woman with lawyers and with the press eye on you, you know? But you do get more of an idea about it.”¹²

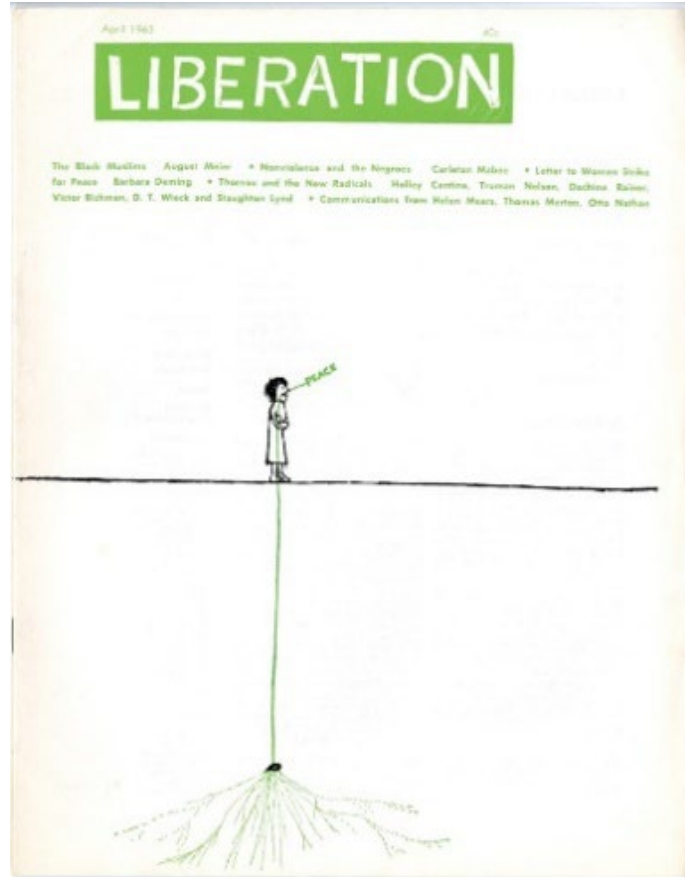


Figure 45: Vera B. Williams, Liberation Magazine Cover, April 1963

Williams was involved in the War Resisters League for most of her life, she sat on the executive committee from 1982 to 1988 and organized and illustrated several calendars. In 1993 she collaborated with Grace Paley on the book *Long Walks and Intimate Talk*, which consisted of Williams' illustrations and Paley's words. She died in her home in New York State in 2015 at the age of 88. Vera Williams authored fifteen books for children and received several awards for her work in children's literature.

Liberation was superficially not all that different from other midcentury magazines of the left such as *Dissent* (more socialist) or *Masses and Mainstream* (more communist). *Dissent* had an arty masthead but art was an afterthought—secondary to the ideas and views presented. *Masses and Mainstream* had more polished and conventional cover art, but the art was set into a consistent layout, a typographic box, and was always in the school of social realism. With *Liberation* the art was unbounded, not with the feeling that art itself is the place of liberation and freedom, but that art,

creativity, experimentation, curiosity is part of the collective movement towards liberation. The inclusion of Vera Williams as an almost exclusive cover artist gave this woman a unique body of work, one that was able to interact with the movements of her times, and also that elevated the magazine—made it playful, buoyant, humorous, and continually relevant.



Figure 46: Grace Paley and Vera Williams in front of a Greenwich Village bookstore promotional display of the War Resisters League 1989 Peace Calendar, “365 Reasons Not to Have Another War,” which Grace wrote and Vera illustrated, December 1988. Photo by Ed Hedemann.

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- ¹ Bostic, Connie. "Vera Baker Williams Oral History." October 3, 2008. 44:05. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume6/alma-stone-williams-interview/>
- ² This is not to say that these movements were not victims of state repression and/or paramilitary violence, which they certainly were. For more on this era see Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism In the 20th Century*. (University of California Press, 2016)
- ³ The Bauhaus had been under increasing pressure from the ruling Nazi party, with many faculty members labeled as degenerate artists, and permanently closed in 1933. Anni Albers was under double threat as a Jew. The Albers' were invited to teach at Black Mountain at its inception in 1933.
- ⁴ Bostic, "Vera Baker Williams Oral History."
- ⁵ Sutton, Gloria. "Communitas ... After Black Mountain College." *bauhaus imaginista*. Edition 4: Still Undead. <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/4324/communitas-after-black-mountain-college?0bbf55ceffc3073699d40c945ada9faf=8abd6a2d5755dd2cd495e5ca25268b75>
- ⁶ Bostic, "Vera Baker Williams Oral History."
- ⁷ Sutton, "Communitas ... After Black Mountain College."
- ⁸ Cornell, Andrew. *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism In the 20th Century*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), XX.
- ⁹ Bostic, "Vera Baker Williams Oral History."
- ¹⁰ Williams, Robert F. "Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?" *Liberation* 4, (September 1959): 4–7; King Jr., Martin Luther. "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," *Liberation* 5, (October 1959): 5–6.
- ¹¹ Editorial. "Hope in the Midst of Fear", *Liberation* 2 (January 1958)
- ¹² Bostic, "Vera Baker Williams Oral History."