

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0575
Tema Okun
March 7, 2008**

**Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES- Tema Okun

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge, Heirs Project director

Interview Date: March 7,2008 (Interview 4 of 4)

Location: Tema's home, Durham, North Carolina

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South. This is a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Tema Okun is a white, Jewish woman who was born in New York City, NY on March 15, 1952. Okun has been active in Middle East peace efforts as a member of Jews for a Just Peace and as a volunteer with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions-USA. Okun has worked with social justice organizations for over 30 years. She has worked as a development director, production coordinator, training director, interim director, trainer and facilitator. Much of her work has focused on anti-racism training. She has been an adjunct professor at Duke University, Guilford College, UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Social Work and at UNC-G. Okun is working toward a Ph.D. in the Department of Education Curriculum and Cultural Foundations at the University of North Carolina—Greensboro. As of 2007, Okun lives with her partner, Tom Stern, in Durham, North Carolina.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master’s degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action’s state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund’s executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training,

facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project “Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists.” The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: March 7, 2008, We recorded again at Tema’s house in her kitchen. It’s a rainy day in the mid-50s. This time I recorded some room sound and even recorded room sound a second time when it started raining again since the rain on the sun windows in the ceiling is audible. I also asked her to say her name in the mic and repeat some questions in her answers. We were really relaxed today since we’re old hats at this. Tema offered me hot tea with honey. Before we began recording she wanted to talk with me about her ideas for community classes for lefties to create some trainings on dismantling oppression. She wanted to make sure I didn’t feel like she was stepping on Heirs Project toes since a segment of the Speak Your Truth trainings are about dismantling oppression trainings. I feel fine about it. I asked her to articulate the differences she sees in the two efforts: it’s not for young folks only; it’s not rooted in storytelling; no trainers are getting paid for it; there’s no emphasis on process—she’s designing it herself.

We recorded for about 45 minutes. At the end Tema said she was bored with the process. I think she was joking about being made to talk so much about herself, but she could have meant being interviewed in general.

TRANSCRIPT—TEMA OKUN

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: March 7, 2008 (Interview 4 of 4)

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: 1 disc; approximately 41 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today is March seventh, 2008. It's a Friday. This is an interview with Tema Okun with Bridgette Burge as the interviewer. This is part of the project, Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists. This is the fourth interview with Tema in this series. The first was on May sixteenth, 2007; the second on June twenty-second, 2007; the third on September fourteenth, 2007; and now the fourth today, March seventh, 2008. We are doing this interview again at Tema's home on Rigsby Avenue in Durham, North Carolina.

Now just say your name and the date and describe yourself a little bit so I can check sound.

Tema Okun: Okay, my name is Tema Okun. The date is March seventh, 2008. We are in my kitchen at 204 Rigsby Avenue in downtown Durham.

BB: Describe the weather today and our clothes.

TO: The weather is nice and rainy today. I'm hoping it will continue to rain. I am still dressed in my workout clothes from this morning. I probably smell, but luckily that doesn't

come through on the audiotape. Bridgette is wearing a green sweatshirt-like thingy and looks very official in her earphones.

BB: I haven't bathed today, so I probably smell, but I haven't worked out either.

Okay, so now I'm going to do about one minute of just background noise.

[pause]

I think that's good. It sounds good. The levels sound good.

Okay, so I guess before we really dive in, your dad has passed away, which is probably one of the biggest things in your life since the last time that we spoke. I missed the memorial service, which I couldn't come to, but I regret that. What were some things that you really appreciated about that and what were some highlights from the memorial service for your dad or anything you want to say about this journey in the last few months?

TO: It was really nice, I think. Dad turned ninety in June of last year and we had a big party for him, which was really great. It was his idea. He wanted a big party, so we said, "Okay, yeah, let's have a big party." The university helped plan the party, so a lot of people came and so he got to see a lot of people when he was alive, which was wonderful. For the memorial service, a lot of people also came. I knew that my dad was accomplished and I knew that he was a big cheese in his field, but I don't think until he died I really quite grasped how beloved he was by so many people. One thing my brother pointed out in his comments at the services, he pointed out how Dad was beloved by people from all walks of life, his peers in the environmental engineering world, but then people whom he met at Carol Woods [retirement home]. In his last couple of months, he was in and out of assisted living and in and out of the health center and formed really strong relationships with the people who were caring for him and who all have made, not all, but many made a real effort to talk to us

and let us know how much they liked our father. So the people who came to the services were from all walks of life and all different kinds of interests. He was interested in a lot of different things and it was just really amazing.

Then the services were nice too because he was a rabid atheist. Somebody came up to us afterwards, one of his old friends, and said, “Well, you managed to get through a whole—the first funeral I’ve been to where there wasn’t a single mention of God.” (laughs) So we managed to do that. I spoke and my brother spoke and his two grandchildren spoke and his brother spoke and then Dan Pollitt, who was a friend and colleague of his. He was probably his best friend and a great activist in the civil rights movement. Essentially, we asked him to talk about our father’s activism. So Dan Pollitt, in Dan Pollitt style, started giving a little speech about the history of the civil rights movement (laughs) in Chapel Hill, which was incredibly interesting, but not really on topic. So we kept trying to make motions and he was going on and on and on. Tom, my husband and partner, exceeded it and he was very graceful about the way he got Dan off. So there were some humorous moments.

What the kids, what the grandkids said were really—Will [Okun] told a story. He had gone to Africa this summer and had to miss the party, but he told a story about how when he was in the middle of the Congo, a very rural area, and he introduced himself, somebody said, “Oh, are you related to Dan Okun?” That was a nice story. The other grandchild, Joedan [Okun], talked about how Dad was considered quite the catch at Carol Woods and we all laughed about that. My family has always had a great sense of humor, so there was a lot of laughter. I put together a little PowerPoint of slides of him and pictures of him and that was really nice. So it was good, it was very good.

BB: Good. I can hear the teapot breathing a little.

[break in conversation to move teapot]

BB: Good, thanks for sharing about that. It sounds like it was really nice.

TO: It was. It was great as funerals go, or services go, or whatever.

BB: Totally shifting gears, okay, when you look back on some grassroots efforts that you've been a part of, is there one or two that really stands out as being like, "Yeah, we could repeat this, we really made some strides"? And what are the reasons for that, if there are?

TO: Well, I'll answer this in my own way because I'm not sure I think about it in terms of strides and I no longer believe that there's a way to do--. We've talked about this before. I don't believe, for me, that there's a way that I could describe. So fuck all that. Nikki [Brown, Heirs Project cultural coordinator at the time of this interview], leave that out.

What I want to say is that for me, what stands out are moments and the moments that stand out are the ones where we as a group, for whatever reasons, were able to move through a kind of formal place into a tangible space of love. That's all I can say.

I think about a workshop that James Williams and I did. We were working with some people from South Carolina and really people who were living—some funder was giving a lot of money for people from low-income communities to come together and do some planning and we went with a bunch of people from these different communities to a retreat center somewhere in rural South Carolina and we had two or three days together. I just remember that one afternoon, and I don't like to claim other people's experiences, except that people talked about this afterwards, but there was a quality of our—we broke through fear; we broke through our not knowing of each other; we broke through, and we got to this place of just, again, palpable love in the room. People had taken incredible risks talking about who they were and what they were struggling with, having to do with drugs and poverty and just

all the different challenges that people were facing. The bravery that people had, the courage that people had, the love that people had as people were sharing, the humor, the laughter, there was just this level of--.

To me, that's when, if I think about a better world, what I think about is a world where more and more of those kinds of moments are possible. And I think people want them and long for them and everybody that I talked to from the group afterwards, I remember taking a long walk with one of the women from the workshop the next time I came to town and talking about her brother, who was in the workshop too, had gone back to drugs since the workshop. And I was just trying to think about how if he had been able, and he was one of the most vibrant participants and somebody who had really taken a lot of risks, and how if we had been able to sustain that space a little bit more, he might have had more of a chance, not that I know anything about overcoming drug addiction, but just that the power in that room was really strong.

So that's what I think about more than a stride or "an organization did this and then they moved to this place and so that taught me this." Although having said that, I will say and I think I've probably also said this before, the places where I feel like I've seen the most movement in organizational culture or organizational policies or organizational procedures is where there have been really strong committed leaders, people who are willing to stick with something even when the people around them are afraid or critical. I'm starting to write a little bit about this for my dissertation and it's just giving me the idea that I need to go to talk to one of them, that it would be interesting to have a better understanding of what makes it possible for some people to do that, which I feel like I don't know. In my paper already, I've

sort of talked about what makes it possible for Dr. King to be a Dr. King or a Leslie Feinberg to be a Leslie Feinberg or any of these people.

Or I think about in my class, I show this film called “Remember My Lai,” which is a very powerful film that a British documentary group put together where they went back and they interviewed three or four people who had participated in the My Lai Massacre, soldiers, and there was one soldier that they interviewed. So almost every soldier participated in this massacre and they were young, they were nineteen, twenty years old. The whole thing was just an incredible tragedy. One of the interviewees is completely mentally gone. He sits in front of the camera and his whole body is shaking and he’s got a whole table of medicine pills in front of him and he’s got a notebook that he’s kept of images of all these things that he did to people and he just can’t-- He was twenty years old. There’s this picture of him at twenty and he’s just young and bright-eyed and beautiful. He can’t come to terms with what he’s done. He really feels it.

Then they have other degrees. Then they have another man who feels perfectly comfortable about everything that he did and feels that he was following orders and it wasn’t about being moral or not being moral; it was about following orders. Then another guy who was kind of in the middle. Then they interviewed this other guy, clearly, well, visually anyway, at least working-class if not low-income, missing some teeth—so this is many years later, twenty years later now—older, an African-American man, as was the guy who was so shaken up. He refused the orders. He said, “When they told me what to do, I said I’m not going to do this.” And they said, “Well, you’re going to be up for court marshal.” He said, “Well, I’m not going to. Court marshal me then. I’m not going to do this.” When the interviewer asked him, “Well, why did you do that?” He said, “Well, because it was wrong

and I'm a red-blooded American just like all the other men in my platoon. No red-blooded American would think that this was the right thing to do."

So what made it possible for this man? Some people like to believe it has to do with education level or some higher level, quote, unquote, higher level of whatever, and for all I know, he was very well-educated, but he didn't appear to be and he appeared to be really, really clear about what the right thing to do was. So what made it possible for him to be that clear about it in the face of incredible peer pressure to behave differently? I think if it was me—I have no idea what I would do and my inclination is that I would not overtly resist the orders. I don't know what I would do, but I know that I am very susceptible to peer pressure. I want to please people around me. So what makes it possible for somebody? Those are the kinds of things I'm interested in. I don't feel like I have any answers at this point about lessons in terms of great strides. I think it's more I feel like it's important for people to have some level of self-awareness and some level of an ability to put themselves in other people's shoes. I don't know how useful that is.

BB: Useful, thanks. It's starting to rain now, so if we can take like thirty seconds just to get the sound and Nikki can use that for audio too. Plus that's just an upsetting story. It's also powerful.

TO: Yeah, it's an amazing movie.

BB: I'm glad I'm not in your class and don't have to watch it. Just kidding.

TO: It's a nice sound.

[pause]

BB: I want to get a little bit about your impressions of the Heirs Leadership Retreat on Saturday. So if you could start by saying, "At the Heirs leadership retreat this Saturday."

Sorry, I've got to get better at doing that. Just thoughts about what it was like to be there or highlights for you.

TO: Well, at the Heirs leadership retreat last Saturday, I really do think that the storytelling we did in the morning was incredibly powerful and part of what I'm talking about in terms of the ability to transform a room full of people and bring us all to a deep appreciation of who we are and the complexity of who people are and what people are dealing with. I thought that was really powerful. I think that's really my main impression.

I think that it's interesting. I went to a meeting. There was a meeting. Downtown Durham, as more and more people move down here, we're starting to form a residents' association or some kind of association. It's very controversial—not controversial, but lots of conversation about what kind of association it should be and should it include business owners, blah blah blah. So I go to the meeting and the contrast was intense. You have this room full of people who don't really know each other. We go around and tell each others' names and then one person sort of facilitates the meeting. There was no grounding in who people were at all and there was no cultural-- I had a fleeting thought: "Well, maybe I should try and do something here." And there was no cultural cradle for it really. It would have been a huge shift and I didn't have the energy to pull it off. So a lot of people were coming at the different issues from a lot of different directions and there was no—what's the word I want?—no quilt, no bed, no cradle, no ground from which we could understand. We were just sort of debating people's point of views. At one point, somebody said, "Well, we have to come up with our Robert's Rules of Order procedures." And I said, "No." (laughs) What did I say? I said something like, "I'm over it. There's no way I'm going to consent to Robert's Rules of Order." I was just like completely uncivil, but it was like, "Oh my God, Robert's

Rules of Order.” I think just this whole ability of expanding the notion that people can be in a space with each other very differently is a really valuable notion. Then this group has to have a relationship with city council, which is even further from any notion of real dialogue.

BB: You touched on this a little bit, but if you were just to go and get flowery, what’s your vision of a liberated world?

TO: I want to go get my poem.

BB: Yeah, do it.

[break in conversation to retrieve poem]

TO: I also—at last Saturday’s Heirs retreat, I loved Lou’s [Plummer, one of the Heirs interviewed for this collection] poem, poetry reading. One idea I would encourage is that lots of people write poetry. It’s unbelievable to me how many people write poetry. I mean, it’s a wonderful thing. When I first realized that, I remember being kind of shocked, but that it might be really cool at every little intersection to invite somebody who has either written a poem or something to share because his stuff was very powerful.

So I wrote a poem because somebody else asked me the vision question. I’m turning pages. That’s what you’re hearing, Nikki. I’m trying to remember what I wrote this for. I think I wrote it in my poetry group. So this is what I wrote. So this is my vision as of January 2008.

People laugh deep and wide from their bellies as they sit together at the table loving the smells of the fresh food lingering and the comfort of the sweet tea as it soothes our throats. We laugh knowing that we are cared for. We laugh because our work calls and the doing of it fills our bellies as our meals has done. We laugh because we have learned to love

well, to see our neighbors as ourselves and ourselves as they might. We laugh because we have enough, all of us, and justice is now the bed we lie on in the dark blissful night.

BB: Beautiful.

TO: When I think about a vision, I think I would say I'm not a pragmatic. I'm not a pragmatic in the least. I've been thinking a lot as I get older about what my skills are and what my weaknesses are and where I have something to contribute and where I should probably stay completely silent. I'm not a pragmatist. So what I have to offer is sort of my idealism and my ability to have images about what I think is possible or desirable in my vision anyway. So that's why I wrote the poem the way I did.

I think for me, and I just read this great book called *The Great Turning* by David Korten where he spends half the book talking about our history of five thousand years of the history of empire. Then he talks about how empire was a constructed choice made by the powerful elite in order to benefit them and that there is, I think he calls it "earth community," is the alternative that he aspires to and talks about a partnership model and a model that's not based on domination, but on recognition of interdependence. So all of that is stuff that I really agree with and believe in. I think for me, I think more about the skills that we have to acquire, culturally that we have to acquire if we're going to make what, he calls it the "great turning," and it has all these aspects.

But if I believe anything, I believe that we have to, which is why the story circle is so powerful, is we have to figure out to transform culture because culture is what holds us all together, the ability of culture to establish what we think is normal and desirable. I think that the skills that we have to learn are first for me, foremost for me, are the ability to love ourselves and each other as ourselves, whatever that might mean, but this real ability to retain

our identity, whatever is important to us historically or for whatever reasons, both identities based on race, class, and gender; identities based on ethnicity; identities even on nation-states, although I don't think those are such a good idea, but to understand that we can have an identity, but it doesn't have to be in opposition to other people, which I think is our idea now, that identity is in opposition to or have to do with domination over or being dominated. So I would say this ability to really cultivate love for other people and to hold the contradictions of having both our own identities and knowing that we are part of a global community and being able to traverse so many of these really fragile contradictions.

So that, and I think the third thing is really learning to live in the fuzziness of lack of clarity. Again, I think our culture, western culture, is really addicted to this idea that very complex things can be simple, they can be torn apart, and they can be scientifically sliced apart and then understood in these discrete pieces, and that's not how it is at all. I don't know if when we talked about my queer theory class, did we talk about how I know somebody is gay? Did I talk about that? One of the things that really struck me in my queer theory class and I'm one of these people, I always learn very slowly. I have to have concepts introduced to me sometimes for decades before I really get them. So this was one of those really huge "aha" moments in the queer theory class when I read this passage where somebody wrote and I've tried to find it, I can't find it again, but someone very wise wrote, "At what point do we know that we're gay or does somebody know that somebody else is gay? Is it the point at which I look at you with longing? Is it the point at which our hands brush? Is it the point at which we kiss? Is it the point at which we have genital contact? Is it the point at which we have genital contact ten times?"

It's absurd, just like the race construct is absurd. It's absurd that we would try and have these discrete categories for people who are so complex and to try and put people's desire or feelings about their own gender into these boxes makes no sense and the only reason it makes sense is in order to use it for domination purposes. And what happens, I feel like, is that as we learn to organize ourselves in opposition to empire, we adopt these very same--. So as oppositional groups or as resistance groups, we'll create our own stringent categories that people have to belong to or not belong to in order to be right on or whatever. So there's something about learning to live with the messiness and complexity and fuzziness that we all are, again while understanding that there are places where we're going to hold our ground. All of those things, I think, are things that we have to learn. So when I think about my role as a teacher, I'm thinking about how do I help myself to learn these things, how do I support other people to learn these things?

BB: So staying on the path of looking ahead, what else is next for you?

TO: I think that's it. I think very specifically, I'm at the end of my classwork for my dissertation and I'm getting a dissertation because I need the credentialing to get a job in a culture that thinks learning has to do with credentialing. So I'm trying to hold the contradiction of living within the constraints of this educational and cultural system that I think is completely full of crap and making the most of it. I'm delighted to be in my program and I feel very fortunate to be in the program I'm in. So the next year is going to be spent writing about what I've just talked about and trying to understand it better myself. My internal struggle with it has to do with—and we talked some about this idea of a community class and I think I'm trying to understand my own activism. I've realized that I don't feel like dissertation is legitimate activism. It's a struggle for me because legitimate according to

who? Like there's some judge and jury out there that even cares what the fuck, excuse me, Nikki, I'm doing. And nobody gives a shit what I'm doing. So it's like why do I think there is some judge and jury out there going, "Well, Tema, if she's going to be an activist, then we're going to check that off and writing a dissertation is not going to make it." Nobody cares, so that's interesting.

And it's also interesting because I find, I've never been intellectually engaged the way I have with this program before. I've always had a pretty miserable experience in school and I love this program and I've been very stimulated by it and I'm very excited about what I'm going to be writing about. So there's this whole other part of me that just wants to write and really devote my energies to that. So I'm trying to figure out my attitude towards all this because my desire conflicts with my judge. (laughs)

BB: Will you say the name of the school and the program that you're in?

TO: I'm at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the Educational Foundations—I can never remember what it's called. It's called ELC. Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations. So you can see why I can't remember it. What does that mean?

BB: Okay, will you say it one more time?

TO: I am in the program at UNC-Greensboro in Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations. It's a small doctoral program within the larger education department. It's flush with very great lefty critical thinking professors and it's just wonderful.

BB: I know that you can remember over the last year that we've been doing this, but is there anything that you'd like to talk about that we haven't touched on?

TO: Oh my God, no. (laughs) God, right now, I'm thoroughly bored. Nikki, I apologize to you. You must be thoroughly bored.

BB: We didn't talk about how you feel about your feet, Tema. How do you feel about your feet?

TO: My feet? I have no opinion whatsoever about my feet.

BB: If you were conducting these interviews or if we expand the Heirs collection, are there people that pop to mind for you who you'd want to be interviewed?

TO: I think it would be really great if you would interview a woman named [Rev.] Mary Jackson, who is a minister, an African-American woman, an elder by now in Chatham County, who I think would bring a lot. I don't think she would consider herself a traditional activist, but she certainly is one. I mean, she's not traditional, but she is certainly someone who has been very active in her community, very important in her community. Who else? Vivette Jeffries-Logan. She is a member of the Leadership Council of the Saponi tribe of the Occaneechi Nation, or it might be the Occaneechi tribe of the Saponi Nation. I think it's Saponi tribe of the Occaneechi Nation, I think. She comes from the Occaneechi people in Hillsborough. I'm sure there are lots of people. It's just my mind is blanking right now.

BB: You're done.

TO: I'm done.

BB: Okay, well, thanks so much.

TO: Eat more ice cream. That's the other big advice I have for people.

BB: I just saw in a book, she said something that they ended up doing this chant at, where was it, some nuclear plant they were trying to shut down. It was like: "No to nuclear

power. Hold the anchovies. No to nuclear power. Hold the anchovies.” So it’s like this power the absurdity of life.

TO: Well, that’s the other thing I think in terms of lessons or keys to strides or whatever. I really admire people who, for one, like Lou and then in my class the other day, one of my students had another student, whose name I need to find, come and give a spoken word poem presentation to the class about a young transgender woman who was killed in Newark who nobody has ever heard about and whose name, because I didn’t write it down, I have now forgotten. It was just the most incredible piece and this ability to channel rage and pain into this kind of expression. This one was just raw and angry and beautiful, which I really love, and then the humor, the folks who can put the humorous twist on these really awful things also, like the chant you were just chanting. I just really, really admire that. So just having a sense of humor at all times, not at all times, but frequently, is very important.

BB: Thank you, Tema.

TO: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. May 2008.