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## Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

A burgeoning body of scholarship over the past decade has begun to reshape popular understandings of the civil rights movement. They have challenged the dominant civil rights story of a nonviolent movement born in the South during the 1950s that emerged triumphant in the early 1960s led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. but then was derailed by the twin forces of Black Power and white backlash when it sought to move North after 1965. By returning and re-asking the fundamental questions of origin, direction, and ideology of the movement, this new scholarship has questioned the most basic aspects of the story: who led and undertook these movements, what the movement was actually about, where it took place, when it happened, and why people engaged in a movement (or what they hoped to change). Their answers – if taken together – begin to show us a different movement: a national black freedom movement populated, shaped, and led by local people in communities across the country that began in the 1940s and 1950s and extended through the 1970s, that married self-defense with nonviolent direct action, radical economic critiques with desegregation protest with international solidarity, that relied on organizing and ground-level theorizing of local problems as well as charisma and national organizations.

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The civil rights movement commands a premier spot in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. A landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* rendering school segregation illegal and a courageous act of civil disobedience by Rosa Parks touched off a grassroots movement that reshaped the nation. Led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the courageous students of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Freedom Summer, the movement was peopled by courageous black folks and their devoted white allies across the South who faced brutal violence and economic repression in their quest for justice. With the support of two liberal presidents, it succeeded in getting the passage of two laws – the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act – while undoing Jim Crow segregation and the legacies of plantation slavery in the South. Celebrated on the King holiday and during Black History month, the dominant civil rights story, then, remains that of a nonviolent movement

born in the South during the 1950s that emerged triumphant in the early 1960s but then was derailed by the twin forces of Black Power and white backlash when it sought to move North after 1965.

But that history – while inspiring – has done as much to contain and distort the movement as it has to illuminate it. It misses Rosa Parks's early activism on behalf of the Scottsboro case, her role as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP and later work for the young Detroit Congressman John Conyers, and her visit to Highlander Folk School. It misses the movements that criss-crossed the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast – as well as the South – that fought for school and housing desegregation, attacked police brutality, opened up unions, and pushed for equitable city services, fair housing practices, and political representation. It misses the long history of self defense in black communities across the country, the push for black history and independent cultural institutions that started well before the 1960s, the cross-fertilizations between organizations like the NAACP, the March on Washington Movement, the Nation of Islam, the Garvey movement, and the American Communist Party.<sup>2</sup> It misses Gloria Richardson in Cambridge, Maryland and Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina – both of whom led local movements that joined nonviolent direct action with calls for self defense.<sup>3</sup> It misses Father Groppi in Milwaukee and the Reverend Albert Cleage in Detroit, both of whom drew from Christianity the seeds of militant action and black nationalism.<sup>4</sup> It misses a more complicated Martin and Malcolm, both of whom were largely feared and isolated at the ends of their lives. Indeed, both leaders had moved politically closer to each other in their calls for self determination and economic justice in the United States, in their attacks on the structures and legacies of colonialism and the hypocrisy of American involvement in the Vietnam war, and in their critique of liberalism and the American credo of "liberty and justice for all."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, this popular history takes away the black freedom struggle's relevance for today by focusing on charismatic leadership, long-suffering rural folk, and backward Southern rednecks.

The limitations and misinterpretations inherent in the popular narrative of the movement have been the focus of much new scholarship.<sup>6</sup> By returning and re-asking the fundamental questions of origin, direction, and ideology of the movement, this body of recent work has begun to map the black freedom struggle in new and important ways.<sup>7</sup> Taking their cues from the elemental questions of inquiry, they have questioned the most basic aspects of the story – *who* led and undertook these movements,<sup>8</sup> *what* the movement was actually about, *where* it took place, *when* it happened, and *why* people engaged in a movement (or what they hoped to change). Unfortunately, because much of this history focuses on the specific – on a locality, an organizer, or a campaign – the power of this historiographical intervention has not been fully recognized. Their answers – if taken together – show us the depth and strength of racism throughout the United States along with a national black freedom movement populated, shaped, and led

by local people in communities across the country that began in the 1940s and 1950s and extended through the 1970s. These movements married self-defense with nonviolent direct action, radical economic critiques with desegregation protest with international solidarity, and relied on organizing and ground-level theorizing of local problems as well as charisma and national organizations. They were not the inevitable outcome of American democracy or proof of the resiliency of American political institutions but the product of slow, tedious work, of standing on the shoulders of others who labored for decades, and of risking jobs, reputation and often physical harm to build a more just society. These local movements were built from scratch and inheritance, out of the labor movement, local churches, community groups, women's organizations, and organized self-defense groups. And in the process, they had to drag local and national politicians and the courts first to acknowledge the damage of racial inequity and then to begin to eradicate that injustice.

Studying the "long movement," as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has termed it, with its myriad array of targets, its diversity of leaders, and its need to make visible the structures of racism makes the movement harder: "Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale."<sup>9</sup> It moves us past the view of segregationists as solely fat Southern sheriffs, jeering Arkansas parents, and hooded Klansmen. While these people helped fill the ranks of resistance movements, such a view reduces racism to rudeness and irrational hatreds, downplaying the economic and political interests that fueled it. Polite segregationists – those who claimed colorblindness and natural boundaries, who agitated for "law and order," "standards," "local autonomy," and "neighborhood schools" – fought as long and hard (and succeeded perhaps longer and more substantially, if covertly) in preventing desegregation, economic and social equity, and open opportunity.

#### WHO: SEEING THE ORGANIZERS AND LOCAL LEADERS

An avalanche of scholarship has brought into public view a cast of different actors and leaders, challenging the prevailing sentiment that the movement was only a Movement because of the emergence of an exceptional set of charismatic national leaders.<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of the 1963 March on Washington, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explained the ways this Great Man-centered paradigm has dominated civil rights history and determined what is looked at and who is seen. "[I]t is interesting that historians initially studied the freedom movement by looking not at the 250,000 marchers, but at the leaders on the platform high above the crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial."<sup>11</sup> Recent scholars, then, have turned the gaze both literally and metaphorically onto the marchers who came from across the country from struggles in Detroit and Montgomery, Philadelphia and Boston, Cincinnati and Cambridge, Maryland. Indeed, the March

brought local activists – high school students and older church women, sharecroppers and independent black entrepreneurs, and unemployed adults – who had been waging struggles across the country together with people who had their first experience of civil rights activism that August day. Dr. King's message was poetic and profound but it was the 250,000 people who heard it that made it significant. It was they who drove the March – and the movement – not just as its foot soldiers but also as its organizers and theoreticians.

Scholars, led by the seminal work of Charles Payne, have turned our attention to the task of organizing, of what it took to build a mass movement. The pivotal work of organizers like Bayard Rustin made it possible to bring more than a quarter of a million people to Washington D.C. for a safe and effective march.<sup>12</sup> Rustin, a long time organizer for Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resistor's League, had been backgrounded – and had also limited his own roles in the movement – because of his homosexuality and his socialism but had served as a behind-the-scenes strategist in Montgomery and for Martin Luther King, Jr. more broadly. He had worked with A. Phillip Randolph for three decades when they hatched the idea for massive civil disobedience and a march for jobs and justice in the nation's capital and sought to get all the major civil rights organizations on board for the event. The NAACP and the Urban League initially balked at Rustin's leading role in organizing the March but Randolph circumvented their concerns by agreeing to chair the March and then appointing Rustin as his deputy. As John D'Emilio demonstrates, Rustin with decades of organizing experience under his belt, took up the Herculean task of bathrooms and bus-stops, of finessing the politics to keep all the groups together and of keeping the Washington D.C. police (all of whom were on duty that day) from harassing the marchers.

This new scholarship also shows us the pivotal position women played as participants, organizers, and leaders in all aspects of the movement while taking seriously the gendered assumptions rife within American culture, and the black community more specifically, that limited women's roles and visibility within these movements.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, while a handful of women shared the dais that August day, no women were allowed to speak on the program. Pauli Murray protested to A. Phillip Randolph "over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing at the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national policy-making decisions." While women played major roles in fundraising for the March on Washington, march organizers like Randolph rejected the idea of letting even one woman speak, saying that it would cause "serious problems vis-à-vis other women and women's groups."<sup>14</sup>

Ella Baker had also highlighted this tension over women's roles and leadership, as Barbara Ransby and Charles Payne demonstrate; as the first

executive director of the SCLC, she still found a limited role for her as a woman within the organization and ultimately resigned her position but organized the conference that would lead to the founding of the SNCC.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the movement also became a place for women to find their voice. Organizations like the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and SNCC were born out of the work of women and became a place for many women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Annie Devine, Winson and Dovie Hudson, Diane Nash, Judy Richardson, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Jean Wheeler Smith, and Joyce Ladner to be taken seriously as strategists, thinkers and actors.<sup>16</sup> Still, many black women also formed their own feminist organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Deborah Gray White, Joy James, and Kimberly Springer have shown, to create an organized and militant voice of advocacy for black women and to address issues being sidelined by civil rights, Black Power, and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist organizations.

Changing our view of the March on Washington also reveals that most Americans deplored the March on Washington in 1963 – in a *Washington Post* poll conducted before the march, two-thirds of those surveyed deplored the March, calling it “un-American.” This re-visioning disrupts the prevalent Americanization of the civil rights movement by showing how broad-based its opponents were. President Kennedy had strongly pressured March organizers to call it off and, when they refused, to shift from their emphasis on “jobs and freedom” to a call to pass the Civil Rights Bill, and most Americans feared the event. Tensions between groups were clear, highlighted by the controversy and calls to censor SNCC chairman John Lewis’s speech and by Malcolm X’s condemnation of the event as a “farce on Washington.” The March’s current iconic status has been achieved through historical erasure of the wide swath of Americans who feared and opposed it and through a whitewashing of the movement’s goals for jobs and freedom to a “dream” of black and white together.

#### WHAT: A NATIONAL BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Recasting who made the movement has necessitated expanding what the civil rights struggle actually encompassed. Framing it as the black freedom movement, as scholars recently have begun to do, has moved our understandings of the movement beyond a dichotomy between civil rights and Black Power both ideologically and chronologically. These strict distinctions have rendered issues like self-defense, internationalism, black history, and police brutality outside of civil rights, while keeping desegregation, civil disobedience, and engagement in the political process separate from Black Power. Yet, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall describes a

“long civil rights movement” that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the “rise and fall of the New Deal Order,” accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was

continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a 'movement of movements' that "deff[ies] any narrative of collapse."<sup>17</sup>

Such a long view foregrounds the early work and behind the scenes organizing – from Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to the shipyards of Oakland – in the late 1940s and 1950s, as Charles Payne, Robert Self, and Beth Bates, among others, have ably demonstrated.

This rethinking moves Black Power out of the riots and rebels narrative that it often occupies and shows it instead as a series of organized local, national, and international movements that have their roots in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Black Power did not appear after the 1965 Watts riot, or after the media heard Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks proclaim it in 1966, but represented, as Peniel Joseph explains, "a powerful, political movement that redefined and deepened American democracy."<sup>19</sup> It had early roots in A. Phillip Randolph's all-black March on Washington Movement that organized against discrimination in the army, defense industries and federal government; in black women's organizing against the "legal lynching" of Rosa Lee Ingram who was given a death sentence after defending herself against aggressive white sharecropper in 1947; in Robert Williams's rebuilding of the Monroe NAACP chapter in the 1950s; and in many militant youth chapters of the NAACP in the 1950s and 1960s. It was an indigenously developed set of tactics which can be seen in black parents creating their own schools in Boston and Milwaukee, in black sharecroppers forming their own political party in Lowndes County, Alabama, in Brooklyn CORE members planning a stall-in to disrupt the first day of the World's Fair. It developed within a series of groups like the Black Panther Party, the CORE, the Young Lords Party, the Congress of African Peoples, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and the US Organization, which pushed city and state governments to provide equitable public services to communities of color, promoted the election of blacks to city government, and cultivated the profound interest in African and African American history, literature, and culture within the black community.<sup>20</sup> Ideologically, theologically, and strategically rooted, nationalism was not just born out of anger and was often continuous with struggles in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

The Black Power movement has often been portrayed as violent and dangerous but recent scholarship has examined the politics behind these generalizations. As Brian Purnell shows, in 1964, Brooklyn's CORE chapter, after years of direct action, called a stall-in for the opening day of the New York World's Fair. This decision led to strident criticism of this confrontational tactic as "violent" from many New Yorkers and black and white CORE members, including a suspension by the national office, but also catalyzed the move towards more militant non-violent tactics. Similarly, Premila Nadasen, Felicia Kornbluh, and Deborah Gray White demonstrate that the NWRO was criticized as uncivil and disorderly when it organized

a “brood mare stampede” to protest Senator Russell Long’s characterization of welfare recipients as “brood mares” and refusal to let them testify before Congress.

Moreover, Black Power, like the civil rights movement, has too often been viewed as the work of a charismatic set of revolutionaries as opposed to a homegrown process of adaptation and alternate and evolving political visions. Recent scholarship has taken us far past Malcolm X and Huey Newton, beyond Carmichael and Hamilton’s *Black Power* and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*. The rewriting of the history of places such as Cambridge, Maryland, and Lowndes County, Alabama reminds us of the Southern roots of Black Power and lifts them from being understood as simply outposts of SNCC to locally grown protests that drew national organizations to their struggle. Employing elements of both nonviolence and self-defense, as Peter Levy explains, the Cambridge struggle focused on desegregation and economics, particularly jobs and housing. However, they refused to participate in city referendum on desegregation, believing that rights should not be subject to polls – and many civil rights leaders lambasted Gloria Richardson for her refusal to organize on behalf of the referendum. Cambridge became a formative experience for many of the important freedom movement leaders, including Malcolm X and leaders of SNCC including Stokely Carmichael who cut their teeth in the midst of the “Civil War” in Cambridge. The emergence of Black Power in the county is credited to Carmichael and SNCC. Yet, an analysis of the rise of political consciousness and activism in Lowndes County, Alabama before the arrival of SNCC shows the local roots of Black Power. As Hasan Jeffries shows, the independent political movement forged in the county came out of years of activism not simply the organizing inspiration of SNCC. Similarly, James Smethurst in his study of the Black Arts Movement foregrounds the importance of locality in the growth of cultural radicalism, taking us from Harlem to Chicago to Detroit to Los Angeles. Black Power, then, was local as well as national, tactical as well as ideological.

#### WHERE: OUT OF THE SOUTH

The prevailing assumptions that undergirded much of the public commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 2004 was that of a profound difference between the South and the North. From National Public Radio to the *Nation* magazine to the special issue of the *Journal of American History*, the prevalent view was that *de jure* segregation was to be found primarily in the South and thus the movement to topple it was based largely in the South. But scholars have taken us out of the South to show us a decades-long national struggle.<sup>21</sup> This history reveals that the civil rights movement did not begin in the South and move North, nor were its successes limited to the South. Movements to address intentional



school segregation, fight for the hiring of black teachers, and establish educational equity rose up throughout the country. In 1958, invoking the Little Rock Nine, a group of Harlem mothers termed the Harlem Nine refused to send their children to segregated schools and was taken to court. Three thousand miles away, community activists in L.A. promised confrontational direct action if school segregation in Los Angeles was not addressed, penned a letter to city officials in 1963 much like King's "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail," and held marches throughout the summer as well as sit-ins and other disruptions into the fall to follow through on their threat.

Throughout the 1960s, scores of demonstrations, pickets, marches, school boycotts, and sit-ins in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Boston, New York, and Los Angeles, among others, protested increasing school segregation, discrimination against black teachers, overcrowded schools, and biased curriculum. As Clarence Taylor demonstrates in his biography of New York civil rights leader the Rev. Milton Galamison, the biggest civil rights demonstration in U.S. history was held not in Washington D.C. in August of 1963 but in New York City in February of 1964. Nearly a half million students and teachers boycotted New York City schools to demand a plan and timetable for comprehensive desegregation of the city's schools.<sup>22</sup> When the New York Board of Education proved intransigent around school desegregation, community activists turned to a call for community control. Battles for community control of schools, like those that erupted in the Ocean Hill Brownsville section of Brooklyn, were not simply Northern features however; in Hyde County, North Carolina in the late 1960s, as David Cecelski shows, black parents boycotted schools for a year to protest the closing of two black schools.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, while foregrounding the similarities of racial tyranny and structural injustice across the United States, scholars have also asked us to consider crucial differences of region and local variation – of the distinctions between rural and urban, of the dramatic reshaping of Midwestern black communities with new waves of Southern migration, of the unique experiences of blacks in the multiracial West.<sup>24</sup> More than half a million black people migrated to the L.A. area between 1940 and 1970, nearly a sixth of all black migrants in this period. Racial tyranny and opportunity looked different in the West – and the multiracial character of West Coast cities had rendered black life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century comparatively more free and racialization more multifaceted than most American cities, as Josh Sides and Douglas Flamming have demonstrated. This shifted precipitously in the postwar period and while south L.A. had been considerably multiracial (encompassing blacks, whites, some Latinos, and Asian Americans), it became increasingly separate and segregated black in the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1965 Watts uprising, police could curfew black South L.A. without touching the rest of the city. Still, activism, community, and culture criss-crossed racial lines, as Daniel Widener and Scott Kurashige demonstrate, making the black freedom movement one that drew its strength from cultural

hybridity and the struggle against colonialism both at home and abroad.<sup>25</sup> White resistance proved resilient and triumphal in California, as Lisa McGirr has argued, with the birth of the new right and its political successes owing much to the racial politics of California.

Moving beyond the Southern view of the movement also forces a reexamination of the dichotomy between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation and highlights the power of the state in enforcing and maintaining segregation throughout the United States.<sup>26</sup> The split between *de facto* and *de jure* which frames Southern segregation *in the law* and Northern segregation *in fact* does not adequately take into account the state-sponsored nature of segregation outside of the South. It inevitably casts Southern segregation as clear and intentional and Northern segregation murkier and unsystematic, growing out of individual prejudices and personal choices rather than concrete state policy.

Complicating this dichotomy requires looking carefully at state-sponsored segregation both inside and outside of the South – the modern roots of which date to the New Deal and the expansion of American citizenship that accompanied it. The New Deal, while providing a safety net and set of protections, put the federal government's power behind a racial hierarchy. Through provisions that specifically excluded domestic workers and farm workers from minimum wage and union protections, through the creation of the Federal Housing Authority which put the federal government's bureaucratic apparatus and money behind ensuring home loans and housing segregation, and through laws that kept the administration of public assistance and jobs programs in local hands, the gap between blacks and whites actually widened through the New Deal, war years, and accompanying postwar prosperity. As Patricia Sullivan, Ira Katznelson, and David Roediger show, the signatures of the New Deal paradoxically may be the instantiation of social citizenship in the United States and the concomitant expansion of institutional racism.<sup>27</sup>

Extensive black migration during the war and in the postwar period to Northern cities was met by an increasingly aggressive segregation policy by local governments and state to contain black people in certain neighborhoods, jobs, and schools. Thus, black students in cities like Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, and Boston were more segregated in 1965 than in 1950. The framing of Northern segregation as *de facto* is decisively repudiated by examining the conscious ways city leaders, local citizens, and a variety of state institutions colluded to ensure this segregation.<sup>28</sup> While often disguised in a language of urban renewal, cultural deprivation, law-and-order, or bureaucratic imperatives, state action expanded and cordoned off the ghetto and its schools in the postwar period. Indeed, under the guise of "colorblindness" and "natural boundaries," public officials used those distinctions between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation to conceal conscious segregationist policies of districting and distributing resources.

A fuller inclusion of Northern activism within the postwar freedom narrative challenges the notion that the movement demised in the North. Drawing from the theories of E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, popular views have linked black Northern migration with the dissolution of the black community; accordingly, divorced from the kin and culture of Southern black life, the movement met its death on the concrete of the North. Yet, Robert Self, in the conclusion of his study of the racial politics of postwar Oakland, demonstrates the “pressing need to move beyond the trope of the black ghetto and the paradigm of crisis and to theorize how African American communities responded – in creative, productive, and at times even halting and unsuccessful ways – to the structural changes brought on my migration and metropolitan reorganization.” (334) Black communities in the North waged a protracted fight for justice and equity but constantly had to “prove” segregation and contend with theories that blamed them for their children’s and community’s inadequacies. Part of the power of local struggles by CORE, the Young Lords, the NWRO and the Black Panthers was to make visible the structures that discriminated against people of color. Pulling trash onto city streets and public spaces, liberating tuberculosis trucks and garbage brooms, exposing the city’s reluctance to provide adequate medical services for poor people, having sleep-ins in welfare offices, and organizing against the health effects of lead paint were ways to highlight and challenge the inequality of public services. Scholarship by Patrick Jones, Jeanne Theoharis, Johanna Fernandez, Komozi Woodard, Premilla Nadasen, and Rhonda Williams has shown the organization of urban black communities and the ways they mobilized to fight against these pathologizing images of black culture and community.<sup>29</sup>

#### WHEN: DISRUPTING THE 1954–1968 TIMELINE

This new scholarship has also pulled the timeline earlier and later, out of the heroic 1954–1965 narrative with King’s assassination spelling the final end of civil rights protest.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the movement emerged far before these “national” events and came up organically through community mobilization. This earlier history – of the March on Washington movement, of school desegregation battles from Cincinnati to Boston to Prince Edward County that predate the *Brown* decision, of battles against police brutality in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s – are needed to see these well-known events simultaneously as culminations and new directions of previous struggles. The role of the UNIA and the NAACP, and particularly the NAACP Youth Councils as Patrick Jones shows in Milwaukee, served as incubators for militant activism in many cities.

Whether Amzie Moore’s labor on behalf of voter registration in postwar Mississippi or Charlotta Bass’ in Los Angeles, whether it was the movement to stop the “legal lynching” of Rosa Lee Ingram in 1947 or the 1960s demonstration outside the United Nations to protest CIA involvement in

the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, an expanded timeline allows us to see a much longer, more varied and resilient history of struggle.<sup>31</sup> Such chronological expansion foregrounds the early phase of movement-building that laid the groundwork often slowly and painstakingly (and sometimes with very little public attention or “success”). This history of activism shows that civil rights struggles have roots in labor and Communist organizing during the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Angela Dillard, Regina Freer, and Martha Biondi all have made connections between the 1930s left, the Communist Party, and the emerging civil rights movement in Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York respectively. This new scholarship also forces us to see the crucial organization and movement building that occurred well into the 1970s. Komozi Woodard’s work on Newark, for instance, documents the pivotal organizing of the Congress of African Peoples formed in 1970, which helped build the largest black political convention of local groups in Gary, Indiana in 1972, while Angela LeBlanc Ernest has shown the extensive community programs developed by the Black Panther Party that took root in the 1970s.

Enlarging the timeline is not only crucial for understanding civil rights activism but for grappling with white resistance. Not a product of the backlash against the 1960s in the North, white resistance constituted a frontlash, forming a near-continuous wall of protest across the country in the postwar period. White citizens moved to protect their new rights (complements of the New Deal and the G.I. Bill) as soon as they secured them.<sup>33</sup> The movement to stymie fair housing and integrated neighborhoods in California was indicative of the vociferous and early evidence of this white resistance. White residents and organized homeowner and local protective associations used restrictive covenants, zoning, economic pressure, harassment and violence to protect “their neighborhoods” in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. This resistance coalesced state-wide after black activists and their white allies succeeded in getting the California state legislature to pass a fair housing bill in 1963. Realtor groups joined with white homeowners to put forth Proposition 14 to repeal the state’s fair housing act. A scant four months after Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act, California voters passed Proposition 14 with a two to one majority (three of four white voters supported it) and affirmed the right to discriminate in the sale of property.

#### WHY (THERE WAS MOVEMENT): RETURNING CLASS TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Part of the danger of the popular narrative of the movement is that it strips the movement of its radical critique. The black freedom struggle was a movement to end American apartheid, to achieve economic justice, and to foster the liberation of oppressed peoples throughout the world. And yet, that focus on poverty and economic inequity, on the racial caste system that supported American capitalism, has been obscured in views of police dogs, lunch counters, and Christian freedom songs. Indeed, one crucial aspect of

this new wave of scholarship has been to return class to the civil rights movement – both in terms of foregrounding a new set of struggles and organizers and of reminding us that the fight against Jim Crow in the South was always a fight to break the back of a feudal economic system. The red-baiting of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s meant that many activists were quieter about their economic agenda but it did not mean that they did not have one. As John Dittmer and Charles Payne make amply clear, the fight for the vote in Mississippi was fundamentally about gaining a tool to disrupt the economic marginalization of rural and urban black Mississippians. Likewise, numerous King scholars have noted that Martin Luther King, Jr. long understood that the campaign for public desegregation and the vote were intimately connected to economics – poverty was ensured through political and social marginalization and thus the apparatus of black marginalization needed to be dismantled. King's critique of American capitalism grew more vociferous in the mid to late 1960s, in part because the Civil Rights Act and Voting Right Act had not dramatically altered black poverty – but in part because after the Watts rebellion, journalists were much more interested in talking to King about class.<sup>34</sup>

Welfare rights were a crucial struggle in the late 1960s yet these battles until recently have been left out of the civil rights, Black Power, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave feminism narratives. The radical imagination has often framed armed black men in berets as the image of militancy, leaving aside angry black women picketing welfare offices, public housing authorities, and national politicians. Yet, the NWRO's core philosophy that welfare was an American right provided as stark and frightening a repudiation of capitalism and American democracy as the Black Panther Party's call for land, peace, and jobs. Formed in 1966 with CORE organizer George Wiley as executive director and L.A. welfare recipient Johnnie Tillmon as chair, the NWRO grew to over 30,000 members, counting more than 100,000 in their local campaigns in places as diverse as Cleveland, Boston, Virginia, and Los Angeles. Welfare rights struggles brought tens of thousands of people to the streets; opened up access to welfare to most who needed it; pressed for and often won special grants for clothing, furniture, and other household needs, and, with more limited success, access to credit for welfare recipients; established the right to due process for welfare recipients; and attempted to move welfare away from casework to a guaranteed annual income.<sup>35</sup> This activism, according to Premilla Nadasen, led to a "seldom acknowledged level of consensus in the late 1960s" for a guaranteed annual income (or negative income tax as conservatives called it).<sup>36</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Reframing the who, what, where, when, and why of the movement reveals a black freedom struggle less perfect but more inspiring, more complex yet also more broad-based than popular depictions suggest. Challenging the

sanitized, Sunday-school version of the struggle, this new scholarship shows the variety of tactics, the wide base of activists, the existence of movements of differing strategies and ideologies across the country, the depth of resistance, and the tenor of leadership that led to a Second Reconstruction in the United States. Taken together, this scholarship represents a powerful historiographical intervention into the politics of race over the past fifty years and into the landscape of race relations in the new millennium.

This new body of scholarship ultimately gives us fresh ways of thinking about contemporary American society. Race relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century look more like “the North” than the imagined South of the civil rights movement; movements today look more like a collection of local struggles than a set of exceptional leaders, the issues look more complicated with a diverse array of targets and hard-to-attack structural forces rather than a seat on the bus or service at a lunch counter (as the movement’s goals have so been caricatured). Students today often lament the lack of a movement today, wishing they had been alive in the 1960s because then the issues were “clear” and they could have been part of a *real* movement. What this history reveals is that this “clarity” was not always apparent but demonstrated to the nation through political struggle.

Many people have come to believe that existing social problems now have internal, more than structural, roots. Lack of work ethic, poor values, dysfunctional behaviors – these kinds of “cultural” explanations are used today to account for persisting social inequities and to explain why social change is not as effective or as relevant as it once was. Yet while “the decline of the black family” and “lack of motivation of black youth” are framed as a new and urgent social reality, such explanations are actually quite old, and have been a key method to justify segregation, educational inequity, and poor city services over the past fifty years. But people found ways to fight against them. Whether it was the Young Lords burning garbage in East Harlem, or Boston mothers arranging for buses to transport their children to open seats in less crowded schools, or welfare mothers pressing social workers for special grants to buy their children school clothes, people took action on behalf of their families and communities and sought to repudiate images of themselves as bad parents or undesirable city residents. If we miss that the justification for segregation in places like Los Angeles and Boston and Harlem was (and still is) being couched in a language of cultural deprivation, poor values, and social isolation, then we miss the multiple methods by which racial inequity was constructed, made invisible and defended, the ways that local people found to unveil and attack it, and the possibility for how it could be done again.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dayo Gore, Alejandra Marchevsky, Mark Wild, and Komozi Woodard for their thoughts and suggestions on this piece.

<sup>2</sup> See B. Bates, "'Double V for Victory' Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941–1946," in J. Theoharis and K. Woodard (eds.), *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside of the South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17–39; R. Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly*, 56/3 (September 2004): 607–32; M. Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See P. Levy, "Gloria Richardson and the Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland," in J. Theoharis and K. Woodard (eds.), *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Struggles in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 97–115; T. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See A. Dillard, "Religion and Radicalism: The Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr. and the Rise of Black Christian Nationalism in Detroit," in *Freedom North* 153–75; P. Jones, "'Not a Color but an Attitude': Father James Groppi and Black Power Politics in Milwaukee," in *Groundwork*, 258–81.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (New York: Orbis, 1991); M. Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> I am dating this new scholarship with the publication of two crucial studies on the movement in Mississippi: J. Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and C. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). This is not to say that Dittmer and Payne were the first to reframe these questions. William Chafe's seminal study of Greensboro in *Civilities and Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), for example, certainly predates them as do many others, such as George Lipsitz's biography of St Louis' local activist Ivory Perry, *A Life in the Struggle* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). But their books – and their work as mentors of young scholars – ushered in new generation of movement scholarship and research paradigms.

<sup>7</sup> Two excellent historiographical reviews of this literature are J. D. Hall, "Civil Rights and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91/4 (March 2005): 1233–63 and P. Joseph, "Introduction to Black Power Studies: A New Scholarship," *The Black Scholar*, 31/3–4 (Fall–Winter 2001): 2–19.

<sup>8</sup> Given the length limitations of this piece, I am focusing on the black freedom struggle; a host of other new scholarship has shown the interconnections between the black struggle and international movements and between Latino and Asian American organizing and African American organizing in the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, "Civil Rights," 1235.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, J. Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999); C. K. Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); C. Fleming, *Soon We will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); B. C. Thomas and V. P. Franklin (eds.), *Sisters in the Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); B. Robnett, *How Long, How Long: African American Women and the Struggle for Freedom and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003); J. James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); B. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; P. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); C. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black World Press, 1998); K. Cleaver and G. Katsiaficas (eds.), *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001); W. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*.

<sup>11</sup> E. B. Higginbotham, "Foreword," in *Freedom North*, viii.

<sup>12</sup> See Ransby on Ella Baker, D'Emilio on Bayard Rustin, Lee on Fannie Lou Hamer, and Levy on Gloria Richardson.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Spencer, "Inside the Panther Revolution," in *Groundwork*, 300–17; Tracye Matthews "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party 1966–1971," in Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, 267–304; K. Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; Thomas and Franklin (eds.), *Sisters in the Struggle*; P. Ling and S. Monteith (eds.), *Gender Politics and the Civil Rights Movement* (New

Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); R. Feldstein, "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture and Black Activism in the 1960s," *Journal of American History*, 91/4: 1349–79, James, *Shadowboxing*.

<sup>14</sup> J. Theoharis and A. Theoharis, *These Yet to Be United States: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties in America Since 1945* (New York: Wadsworth, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Ransby, *Ella Baker*; W. Hogan, "Many Minds, One Heart," Ph.D. dissertation (Duke University, 2000); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

<sup>16</sup> C.L. Greenberg (ed.), *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Hall, "Civil Rights," 1235.

<sup>18</sup> W. Van Deburg's *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) one of the only extended studies of Black Power, begins in 1965. In their extensive overviews of civil rights struggles, Adam Fairclough's *Better Day Coming* (New York: Viking, 2001) and R. Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound* (New York: Penguin, 1990) also locate Black Power largely in the North and start it in 1965. Even "Eyes on the Prize," the acclaimed Blackside PBS documentary, does not pick up the story of Black Power until Malcolm X; the rest of the episodes look at issues and movements of the late 1960s and frame the race riots in Watts and Detroit outside of activism that had previously existed in both cities.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>20</sup> See K. Woodard on CAP in *Freedom North and Groundwork*, 287–311, 76–96; S. Brown on the US Organization in *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); J. Fernandez on the Young Lords Party in "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City," in *Freedom North*, 255–85; Y. Williams, *Black Politics/White Politics* (New York: Brandywine, 2000); B. Purnell on CORE in "Driving Awhile for Freedom," in *Groundwork*, 45–75; J. Smethurst on the Black Arts Movement in *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); L. Hill on the Deacons for Self Defense in *The Deacons for Self Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); C. B. Strain's *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); A. Umoja, "1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," *Radical History Review*, 85 (Winter 2003): 201–226.

<sup>21</sup> This differentiating of Northern and Southern racism – and the construction of the South as backward – has a history back to the Revolution. Numerous scholars of antebellum and Reconstruction America have shown the ways racial ideology, segregation, and inequity have their own roots in the North and were never just a product of a backward agrarian South.

<sup>22</sup> See C. Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> See Pritchett, *Brownsville* and D. Cecelski *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> The North is defined as everywhere not in the South (i.e. not the Confederacy) despite the regional variations that existed between the Northeast, Midwest, and West. This local history of black struggle in L.A. has recently come into view by scholars such as Josh Sides, Becky Nicolaides, Douglas Flamming, Quintard Taylor, Regina Freer, and Kevin Leonard, among others, who have begun to revise popular notions about race in the West, about the landscape of race and power in Southern California, and about the meanings of the Watts riot. J. Sides, *L. A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); B. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Q. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, eds. L. de Graafe et al. (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001); D. Flamming *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Freer, "L.A. Race Woman"; J. Sides, "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," *American Quarterly*, 56/3 (2004): 583–605. Also see R. Self's work on Oakland, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).



<sup>25</sup> D. Widener, "Something Else: Creative Community and Black Liberation in Postwar Black Los Angeles," Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 2002); S. Kurashige, "Transforming Los Angeles: Black and Japanese American Struggles for Racial Equality in the Twentieth Century," Ph.D. dissertation (University of California, Los Angeles, 2000); K. Leonard, "Years of Hope, Days of Fear: The Impact of World War II on Race Relations in Los Angeles," Ph.D. dissertation (University of California, Davis, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> See T. Sugrue *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); K. Jackson, *Craggrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); A. Back, "'Exposing the Whole Segregation Myth': The Harlem Nine and New York City's School Desegregation Battles," in *Freedom North*, 65–91; J. Theoharis "'I'd Rather Go to School in the South': How Boston's School Desegregation Complicates the Civil Rights Paradigm," in *Freedom North*, 125–51; I. Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); J. Dougherty *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> D. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Become White. The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); I. Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); P. Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). This also parallels A. Hirsch's analysis in *Making the Second Ghetto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) of the development of a legal and institutional method to keep black people in their place in postwar Chicago.

<sup>28</sup> This formulation of Northern segregation has begun to be taken apart by the careful work of scholars such as Kenneth Jackson, Arnold Hirsch, Tom Sugrue, and Craig Wilder. For rich historical work on the rise of post-civil rights conservatism, see R. Perlestein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); T. B. Edsall and M. D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1992); D. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> R. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Bates on the March on Washington Movement; Freer on Charlotta Bass; R. Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (New York: Back Bay, 2001); T. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name* (New York: Crown, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Numerous scholars have drawn connections between local struggles, international independence movements, and the context of the Cold War. See D. Gore, "'To Light a Candle in a Gale Wind': Black Women Radicals and Post-World War II Radicals in U.S. Politics," Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 2004); F. C. Wilkins "'In the Belly of the Beast': Black Power, Anti-Imperialism, and the African Liberation Solidarity Movement, 1968–1975," Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 2001); B. Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U. S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); R. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); M. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); N. P. Singh, *Black Is a Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); V. Prashad, *Everyone Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); M. Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> See C. Payne and A. Green (eds.), *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850–1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); A. Dillard, "From the Reverend Charles A. Hill to the Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr.: Change and Continuity in the Patterns of Civil Rights Mobilizations in Detroit, 1935–1967," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Michigan, 1995); Freer, "L.A. Race Woman"; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams and Race Rebels* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> See Sugrue on Detroit, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Nikolaidis on South Gate, California, *My Blue Heaven*; L. McGirr on Orange County, *Suburban Warriors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); M. Davis on Los Angeles, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> J. Theoharis, "Alabama on Avalon": Rethinking the Watts Uprising and the Character of Black Protest in Los Angeles," in P. Joseph (ed.), *Black Power Studies: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> See P. Nadasen *Welfare Warriors* (New York: Routledge, 2005); F. Kornbluh "Black Buying Power: Welfare Rights, Consumerism and Northern Protest," in *Freedom North, 199–222*; D. G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998). On birth control and sterilization, see J. Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 189.

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