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Civil Rights History
from the Ground Up

*Local Struggles,
a National Movement*

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Focusing Our Eyes on the Prize

How Community Studies Are Reframing and Rewriting the History of the Civil Rights Movement

In 1980 Randall Kennedy had this to say about William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*: "Thoughtful, well written and thoroughly researched, it is a work of disciplined, committed scholarship that is likely to inspire imitation." Neil McMillen wrote, "Viewing Greensboro as a microcosm of the nation, Chafe has boldly suggested an interpretive framework in which to examine the larger struggle for Afro-American rights." These would prove to be two of the most prescient sentences in the annals of book-review prophecy. The flood of community studies that followed the publication of *Civilities and Civil Rights* has reshaped the historiography of the civil rights movement in the span of a quarter-century, leaving a vastly changed (and ever-changing) field in its wake.¹

The community studies that followed Chafe's lead made the body of literature on the civil rights movement one of the most vibrant in the field of United States history. They have also revolutionized both historians' periodization of the movement and our understanding of what the movement really looked like and meant to the people who conceived, organized, staffed, and led it. In this chapter I examine what community studies have done and are doing to reframe and reconceptualize the larger historiography of the modern American black freedom struggle.²

In the spirit of the inspiring conference Emilye Crosby organized at SUNY

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Geneseo in March 2006, "Local Studies, a National Movement: Toward a Historiography of the Black Freedom Movement," I have written this chapter in a more conversational and less academic style than I might have otherwise, and with the goal of raising more questions than I answer. I also include some informal intellectual autobiography. I do so, at least in part, in the hope that my discussion of the historiographical questions that most interested me when I embarked on my own community study of Sunflower County, Mississippi, more than a decade ago will encourage others to wrestle with similar issues.

Community and statewide studies have done much more than add new layers of detail to our understanding of this chapter in the black freedom struggle. By reframing the questions that historians ask about civil rights movements (the concept must be understood in the plural; there was no monolithic civil rights movement), they have reconceptualized the struggle itself. In fact, they question whether the term "civil rights movement" fits at all; many of the local movements they bring to our attention defined *themselves* as movements for human rights, for freedom and self-determination, more so than as movements for constitutional protections and civic rights. As Clayborne Carson has argued, local black movements whose preeminent goal was the creation of enduring local institutions, not protest marches or lobbying campaigns, can more properly be called parts of the "black freedom struggle"—even if what happened during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s was categorically different from earlier (and later) chapters in that struggle's history. (Nonetheless, in the interest of clarity I will use the term "civil rights movement" throughout this essay.)³

When Chafe published *Civilities and Civil Rights* there was already a large and growing body of literature on civil rights organizing—this just two decades after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the point at which most scholars then agreed that the movement had ended. David Levering Lewis's King biography was already a decade old; Taylor Branch and David Garrow were well into the research that would result in their own King biographies, *Parting the Waters* (the first of a three-volume set) and *Bearing the Cross*, respectively. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick had published their study of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Clayborne Carson was nearing completion of his institutional history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Steven Lawson had published his first work on black voting power in the South since World War II (two additional vol-

umes would follow), and Harvard Sitkoff published his survey of the movement the following year. There were already enough journalistic treatments and movement memoirs to strain a bookshelf. In rereading the bibliographic essay that accompanies Sitkoff's *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980*, I am struck by the amount of work, some of which has stood the test of time quite well, that had already been published by the early 1980s.⁴

In the years since, historians have written important biographies of movement participants, from "national leaders" like King to grass-roots activists and foot soldiers like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and they have turned their attention to more thematic studies exploring such topics as religion in the movement, southern whites' responses to the movement, the role of mass media, and gender and masculinity concerns within the movement. Each of these approaches yields important new insights into the history of the civil rights movement, but I will focus my attention here on the community studies that followed Chafe's trail and will confine myself to those that have studied southern communities.⁵

Chafe's deeply researched monograph distinguished itself from the dozens of other civil rights histories then in existence by shifting attention away from national leaders and national lobbying campaigns toward local people and their local struggles to define problems, conceive of solutions, and manage complex movements themselves, over a long period of time. Two other first-rate community studies followed close behind *Civilities*: Robert J. Norrell's examination of the voting-rights movement in Tuskegee, Alabama, and David Colburn's study of St. Augustine, Florida. Colburn challenged orthodoxy when he concluded that Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) did more harm than good by involving themselves in St. Augustine blacks' fight against segregated bus lines, because they did nothing to develop indigenous institutions that could carry on the fight after they left.⁶

The community studies that followed these three seminal works have done more than just pile on detail to an unchallenged and unchanging narrative of the movement. To make that case, I will revisit some of the questions that most interested me as I embarked on the research project that led to my dissertation and first book, a community study of the civil rights and white resistance movements that emerged from an economically poor, rural, majority-black county in the Mississippi Delta. The questions that interested me in that project may not interest other civil rights historians, and vice

versa, and that is for the best. I have argued that the Mississippi Delta's experience is central to the American experience, and I get frustrated when others try to pretend that Mississippi is somehow outside of the United States. But I stop short of arguing that the experience of people in Sunflower County, Mississippi, was somehow normative for the South or the nation as a whole. My goal was to write a book that accurately placed one community's history of race relations within the context of that community's particular history, which took place in the context of a unique state and regional political culture, and which impacted and was impacted by so-called "national" events in the civil rights timeline. I hope I accomplished that.

I knew long before I had even heard of Sunflower County, Mississippi, that I wanted to use the community-study approach to study the history of American civil rights movements. As a freshman in an introductory U.S. history survey course at the University of North Carolina I read *Civilities and Civil Rights*, the history of a local movement in Greensboro, N.C., that coalesced in the 1940s and 1950s, nurtured the college students who engaged in the first sit-ins in the early 1960s, and continued in various iterations through the next two decades. One of Chafe's arguments, that the Greensboro movement exposed the myth of North Carolina's racial progressivism as a powerfully self-satisfied justification for white supremacy, almost literally struck me.

I can grandly characterize my life as a historian in the terms of BC and AC: "Before *Civilities*" and "After *Civilities*." For me the book was history about incredibly engaging people, but not larger-than-life heroes—it described real people I could recognize. As I first read the book, my maternal grandparents lived in Greensboro, an hour's drive from where I was in Chapel Hill; my family had lived in the Atlanta area nearly all my life, but I had been to Greensboro dozens of times as a child and young adult to visit them. My mother had been a student at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, now UNC-Greensboro, when the North Carolina A&T students staged a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in 1960. I heard firsthand from my mother and her friends about how young whites in Greensboro, who would have self-identified as liberal, reacted to the sit-ins: that is, with fear.

I knew many, many North Carolinians of my grandparents' and parents' generations, some of them family members, who proved Chafe's civility thesis for him. It wasn't uncommon to hear my father's relatives speak, unbidden, about how well they all got along with "the coloreds" in Greenville, N.C., over on the eastern side of the state. For instance, the Greenville

city council considered in the late 1980s a proposal to rename Fifth Street to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Fifth Street was where my grandparents lived throughout my father's childhood and my own, and where my grandfather's straight-out-of-Flannery O'Connor sisters still lived in my great-grandparents' Victorian home. My great-aunt Jesse despaired. "Why can't they just change the name of Fifth Street where it goes through Colored Town and leave us alone?" she keened—and that's more or less what the town council eventually did.

Seeing this mind-set chronicled and analyzed in Chafe's book, having it placed in a richly detailed context, seeing its three-dimensional characters portrayed as historical actors, was powerful for me. It made me want to be a historian, too. Luckily, I got that chance. When Bill Clinton was elected to the White House in 1992, the very same great-aunt Jesse somehow got the idea that Clinton was going to tax all the money she had inherited from her parents decades ago, so she gave much of it away in chunks to her great-nephews. Mine paid for my first year of graduate school.

When I began my graduate studies at the University of Texas and started hunting for a research topic, I had a general idea that I wanted to do something in line with Chafe's methodology. But the community studies on the civil rights movement that were published by this point (the early 1990s) tended to be about communities with long-established black middle classes. (Chafe's Greensboro and Norrell's Tuskegee are the two classic examples.) The way civil rights historians tended to frame their narratives placed well-educated African Americans with good, stable jobs at the center of the stories, and I thought that the very fact that they wrote about middle-class blacks might mean that the movements were defined too narrowly. The movements covered by the existing literature tended to push for equal access to public spaces, better (racially integrated) public schools, and the ballot. I wanted to explore the history of a place without much of a black middle class to see whether the movements that emerged from that locale looked any different from the movements in communities we already knew about.

In my view at the time, scholarship on the civil rights movement, on both the local and national levels, was also taking too much for granted about the goals that movement participants created for themselves. I wanted to ask more basic questions about *how* people became civil rights activists. Decades after the fact, it seems so natural that a father whose children are being educated at a substandard school would start advocating for better educational

opportunities for his children. It seems self-evident that a woman born in the United States who was denied the ballot would of course march around the courthouse until she was afforded her due. But we know that most of the people in these circumstances did not and do not become activists. Life tends to get in the way of social protest organizing: among a million other things there are kids to take care of and employers to satisfy, and to become a civil rights activist in most parts of the South during this period was, by definition, to put your family and your livelihood at risk.

So why did some people “get organized,” as the saying goes? Once they did get organized, how did they come up with the vocabulary they needed to define the problems that faced them? Did they wait to hear what Martin Luther King had to say about it on the television news? Once they defined the problems, how did they imagine the solutions to address them? From what sources did they draw their ideas? How did they decide who to try to convince to join them, and who to leave out? These are all basic questions about the development of social movements; I wanted to jump in and wrestle with them, and the community studies model seemed the ideal way to do it.

(An aside: as I began to ponder these issues and dig around in the archives, John Dittmer published *Local People* and Charles Payne published *I've Got the Light of Freedom* within a year of each other. What timing! I know that every one of the authors in this collection has been profoundly influenced by these books, and even more so by the examples that John and Charles set for us as scholars and colleagues. I have heard Komozi Woodard describe the books as “force fields” that made the study of poor people’s movements legitimate in the academy and protected people like us from the charge that our work was marginal. I think he’s right about that. In any case, these books were so influential on me as a graduate student that I literally had to put them away and force myself not to look at them while I wrote my dissertation. It was too tempting to just pick a page in one of their books and run with whatever idea was there. When my book on Sunflower County was finally published and I received my first hardback copy, the first thing I did was wedge out a space for it on the bookshelf between *Local People* and *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, hoping that it might actually belong there. I may be crazy, but I doubt I’m the first or last author to do that.⁷)

One of the first big historiographical issues I wanted to take on in my project was white resistance to the movement. At the time, historians tended to describe organized white resistance to the civil rights movement in terms

of a backlash that began in response to *Brown* and really coalesced only after the movement succeeded in forcing Congress to pass the important pieces of reform legislation in the mid-1960s. There was, of course, white violence at every stop along the way in the common civil rights timeline, from Montgomery to Greensboro to Birmingham to Memphis, but there was little attention paid to white organizing. Much of the attention that *was* paid to white organizing tended to frame it in terms of the political organizing and reorganizing that swept the Solid South away from the Democrats and into the Republican party. This narrative picked up with Nixon’s southern strategy in the 1968 election and culminated with the snowballing Republican majorities in the South in the 1980s and 1990s, a process that resulted in retreat on the part of the federal government in its commitment to upholding minority rights.⁸

Again, I suspected there was more to this. I was interested in how whites organized proactively to preserve Jim Crow segregation, and I was interested in how this kind of organizing did or did not affect the goals and tactics of those in black freedom struggles. Because I wanted to write about a community without a black middle class and because of my interest in interaction between white segregationists and the black freedom struggle on the local level, I settled on the community of Sunflower County for my study.

Sunflower was the home of Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper with almost no formal education who became the embodiment of SNCC’s organizing ethic, “Let the People Decide.” It was also the home of James Eastland, the reactionary planter and U.S. senator who was almost single-handedly responsible for delaying federal civil rights legislation for as long as possible in the halls of Congress. Those two celebrities drew me to Sunflower, but what hooked me were the people’s movements that the county produced. On the one hand, Sunflower generated a homegrown black freedom struggle that ended up looking as much like a human rights movement as a civil rights movement, and on the other hand it brought into being the self-named Citizens’ Councils, the preeminent pro-segregation organization that ended up sweeping through the South.

A fair amount had been written about the Citizens’ Councils by that point, including a terrific monograph from Neil McMillen that examined the Councils’ founding and spread, and Numan V. Bartley’s examination of white pro-segregation organizing throughout the South. So I knew that the Councils had formed because white men in Indianola, the Sunflower County seat, were worried about the implications of the *Brown* decision. I wanted to see if

maybe there were local events that encouraged them to organize where and when they did—again, not everyone becomes an activist. Why did these particular men in this particular place choose to organize?”

I kept coming back to something the president of the town's bank was reported to have said at the first meeting of the Indianola Citizens' Council. "This meeting should have been held 30 years ago . . . when it was very noticeable that the Negro was organizing," Herman Moore announced. "Then there was a light in every Negro church, every night, regardless of the time you passed. . . . The Negro continued to meet and organize and through their concerted efforts, with the help of what I believe to be subversive groups and others, have made them a force to be reckoned with." That jumped off the page at me the first time I read it. Moore and his compatriots perceived that black freedom organizing had been proceeding for too long, and that they—the good white male citizens of Indianola, Mississippi—needed to do something to stop it. The organization they created defined racial segregation as a positive good, created and maintained a genteel image in the press (the Citizens' Councils were popularly known as "the white-collar Klan"), and set out to terrorize blacks who asserted their rights as American citizens—not so much through physical violence (though they used plenty of that, too), as through economic intimidation. The effect was just as pernicious either way.¹⁰

Indeed, after a little digging I found that the Mississippi NAACP State Conference of Branches held its state convention in Indianola just a few months before Moore spoke in 1954. As the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court debated the merits of the *Brown* case—this predated the announcement of their decision—state NAACP officials gathered in Indianola to offer optimistic predictions of a favorable outcome and relatively strident rhetoric about what the decision would mean for Mississippi. They came to Indianola because a charismatic young medical doctor moved back to his hometown in 1951, reinvigorated the local NAACP chapter, and began organizing a voter registration drive that threatened to upset the community's balance of power. I argued in my book that the Citizens' Councils movement could have emerged from any one of literally hundreds of communities in the southern states, but it emerged from Indianola specifically because local whites found that kind of activism so threatening.

The modus operandi of the Citizens' Councils was to create something close to a pro-segregation monolith among whites in their communities, and then to use that unanimity to threaten African Americans who dared

assert their citizenship rights. In Indianola, that meant terrorizing Clifton Battle, the young medical doctor who had returned to Indianola and led a voter registration drive in 1953–1954. Interestingly, the county registrar had allowed Battle, his wife, and around fifty other well-to-do black farm owners and small business owners to register, but that door slammed shut when the *Brown* decision came down. Herman Moore's bank and others called in loans from local blacks who joined the NAACP, and they knew exactly who was joining because someone at the Indianola post office intercepted and read black people's mail.

Ironically, by punishing these African Americans and driving them away—they literally drove Battle out of town—they ensured that whatever civil rights organizing occurred in the future would have to concentrate on poor people. Indeed, the civil rights movement that Fannie Lou Hamer led in Sunflower County beginning in 1962 was a poor people's movement. Over the long haul it had as much in common with a human rights movement, as we understand that term in an international context, as it did with a civil rights movement, as we understand that term in the context of American history. Two biographies of Hamer make it clear that her first priority as a public figure was to make sure that her neighbors, many of them desperately poor and ill-educated, had clothes to wear, access to decent health care, and enough food to eat. As she understood it, having the bare material essentials of life was a human right that could be guaranteed only through political organizing in the political economy she inhabited.¹¹

Hamer and her comrades formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to provide themselves access to the electoral process that had been systematically denied them as blacks. But when the Sunflower County Freedom Democrats gathered to discuss political strategies, they discussed how they could win a minimal standard of living for their neighbors through the electoral process. They also debated their party's stance on U.S. policies toward Cuba and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Hamer and the Freedom Democrats understood their mission as a civil rights struggle to change the political economy of Mississippi and the United States, but they also saw themselves as actors on the world stage.

What I found as I dug deeper into the history of the Citizens' Council and the history of black organizing in Sunflower is something that other authors of community studies have discovered: the more you learn, the more convinced you become that the chronology of the civil rights movement as

it is popularly understood is just plain wrong. The creation of the Citizens' Council is commonly understood as a knee-jerk reaction to the *Brown* decision. Well, it was that, at least in part. But the organization emerged *when* it did and *where* it did because black Sunflower Countians began organizing, began pushing, began refusing to be constrained by white expectations of their behavior under the sharecropping system, long before the Supreme Court announced its *Brown* decision. And local movements did not respond to "national" events per se. Indianola whites formed their Citizens' Council in response to *Brown*, but they would not have organized in the first place had it not been for Battle's activism on the local and state level. As Herman Moore's telling admission makes clear, African Americans in Sunflower County did not wait for the justices of the United States Supreme Court to tell them the coast was clear to begin organizing in their own interest. And Sunflower County whites certainly did not wait for a "national" organization to tell them what to do. They organized themselves.

I also found that the chronology for the movement in Sunflower County had to stretch forward in time to include a school boycott and a strike among unionized catfish processors that both occurred in 1986. My study essentially tested the SNCC method of organizing for social change over a long period of time, and I considered questions about how that method succeeded or failed in Sunflower County. SNCC field-workers who moved into communities like Sunflower came with the goal of training local people to be leaders who could create their own free-standing, community-sustaining institutions. By 1986 Fannie Lou Hamer had been dead for nine years; no figure as charismatic as she led either of the 1986 movements. The school boycott was organized by a group of middle-class blacks. This by itself made the movement new and different in the county's history; there had been no black middle class to speak of in Sunflower before then. The middle-class blacks of the 1986 movement called themselves Concerned Citizens, and they had wide, cross-class support from the entire African American community. The school boycott succeeded, and white leaders were forced to accede to Concerned Citizens' demands. In contrast, the black middle class failed to support the striking catfish workers later that year, and their strike failed. The creation of intra-racial, cross-class coalitions, I concluded, was the key to success for social protest movements in communities like Sunflower.

In pushing the chronology forward in my study I concluded that the 1986 movements responded to many of the same conditions, defined their goals

similarly, and used many of the same tools that earlier movements had used, though the demographics of the movements were different. I also tried to demonstrate how terribly difficult it is to build and sustain a mass social protest movement. Any signs of progress to be found in Sunflower County over the span of the four decades my study covered were the results of painstaking, two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back community organizing and indigenous institutions, not charismatic personalities or outside organizations.

Others have learned that defining success and failure in social protest movements is a tricky business, and so much depends on how historians frame and reframe these questions. The best example of the ways in which framing determines conclusions about movement success or failure can be found in historians' writings on the movement that developed in Albany, Georgia. David Levering Lewis, David Garrow, and Taylor Branch, the authors of major first-generation King biographies who to varying degrees attempted to tell the whole story of the civil rights movement through King's involvement in it, all devoted considerable attention to the black freedom struggle in Albany and King's role there. Adam Fairclough did as well, in an organizational history of SCLC and in a short King biography.¹²

The self-named Albany Movement was formed in the autumn of 1961 when Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon, field workers for SNCC, moved into Albany to begin a voter-registration campaign, and formed a coalition with a local NAACP chapter and other indigenous organizations. The Albany Movement demanded an end to Jim Crow segregation in public and municipal facilities, progress toward the fair employment of blacks in the community, and the elimination of police brutality. Less than a month after the coalition's initial founding, a faction invited King and SCLC into Albany, prompting a bitter power struggle among SNCC, SCLC, and the NAACP for control of the Albany Movement.

King's methods of creative antagonism produced headlines throughout the country but they failed to advance the Albany Movement's program, due in large part to Albany police chief Laurie Pritchett's nonviolent jujitsu. Pritchett read King's book on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and studied his methods. Pritchett directed his police force not to use violence against the Albany protesters (at least in front of the news cameras) and arranged for additional space in neighboring counties' jails so that the mass arrests of protesters would not cripple the city. He succeeded in blunting the

campaign's impact. Lewis, Garrow, Branch, and Fairclough agreed that King and SCLC learned important lessons from the Albany campaign, and for all intents and purposes each ended the history of the movement in Albany in August 1962, when King and SCLC pulled up stakes in southwest Georgia, taking with them all national media attention. The Albany Movement continued, however, and SNCC redoubled its commitment to the area with the creation of its Southwest Georgia Project the following year.¹³

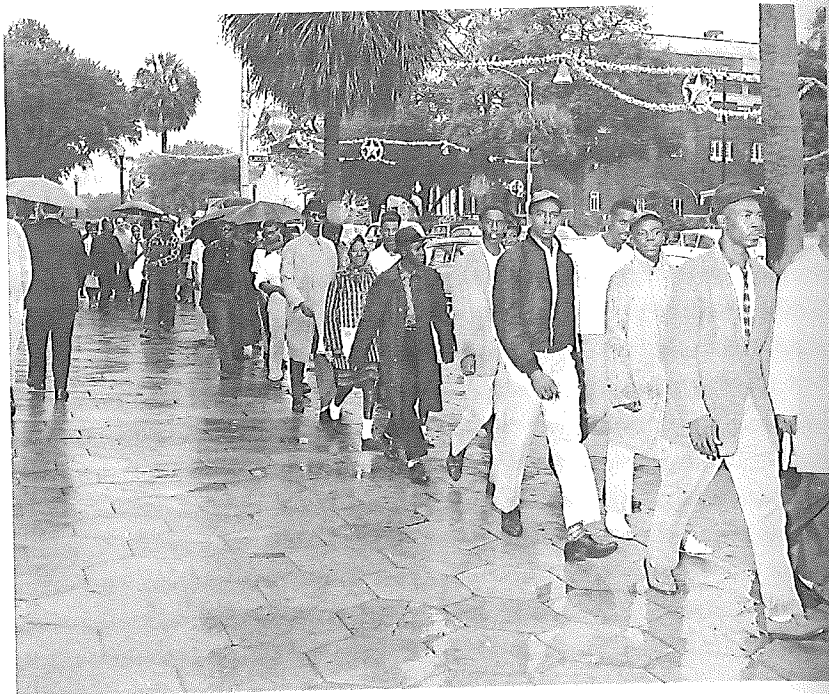
Vincent Harding, a somewhat more imaginative King biographer and movement historian, explored what the Albany experience meant for King as an activist and an organizational leader. In a 1979 essay he emphasized the creative tensions between SNCC field-workers and King, whom the representatives of the antihierarchical SNCC had by then begun to refer to derisively as "De Lawd." Others had criticized King and SCLC for asking for too much in Albany—complete desegregation of public facilities and practical steps toward economic justice—but Harding argued that the strategy conceived by King and other leaders was "one forced upon them by the powerful thrust of the freedom movement," an illustration of the way that the people often led the leaders in this social movement. "The internal force of the people's rush toward justice, their sense that the new time was indeed upon them, the growing understanding of the wider significance of their movement . . . all these pushed the black freedom fighters out of the churches, out of the train and bus stations, out of the dime stores, out into the streets," Harding wrote. Although short-lived, King's involvement in the Albany Movement was essentially positive as Harding defined it, if for no reason other than the important and practical lessons on organizing King and SCLC learned from it, and then applied to the Birmingham campaign.¹⁴

Howard Zinn, a participant-observer of the Albany Movement and the author of the first tentative history of SNCC, wrote in his own memoir, "It has often been said, by journalists, by scholars, that Albany, Georgia, was a defeat for the movement, because there was no immediate victory over racial segregation in the city. That always seemed to me a superficial assessment." Zinn concluded, "Social movements may have many 'defeats'—failing to achieve objectives in the short run—but in the course of the struggle the strength of the old order begins to erode, the minds of the people begin to change; the protesters are momentarily defeated but not crushed, and have been lifted, heartened, by their ability to fight back." His last point is, I think, especially

salient. True *movements* occurred when the people of a given community found in themselves—both as individuals and as members of a group—the courage and strength to define the obstacles they faced in an inherently unequal society and began to propose solutions that would allow them to overcome. It is exactly this understanding of the development of civil rights movements, I think, that best characterizes the new generation of community studies. (Those of us who plow this ground owe a great debt to Lawrence Goodwyn, who first identified how important it was for local people to create "a movement culture . . . a new way of looking at things" that helped them develop "a new democratic language" in his history of the Populists.)¹⁵

John A. Kirk, a British historian, stepped into this debate in 2005 when he published yet another King biography. Kirk's treatment of the Albany Movement, a freedom struggle that preceded King's 1961–1962 involvement and continued long after King and SCLC left, drew the ire of movement veterans. Because his narrative focused on the charismatic figure of King, Kirk was able to call what happened in Albany a "defeat" because the Albany Movement failed to tear down every vestige of Jim Crow within a matter of months. After all, King's retreat from southwest Georgia left local blacks "disillusioned, frightened and bitter," according to a contemporaneous report from a leader in the Albany Movement, and Pritchett was able to brag that his town was "as segregated as ever" in 1963. Kirk's narrative left Albany with SCLC's retreat, never to return.¹⁶

Joan Browning, a white Georgia native who spent time in an Albany jail as a member of the first group of Freedom Riders into the town, publicly challenged Kirk's framing of the story. "Albany was not 'King's' campaign—he was an ineffective interloper in Albany," she wrote in an e-mail to the publicly accessible H-South e-mail listserv in response to a review of Kirk's biography. "That was an Albany Movement and a SNCC campaign and when one looks at the Albany Movement's goals for the campaign, then it is a success." When King left Albany in 1962, she pointed out, the Confederate battle flag flew over city hall. By the time Kirk's tale of "defeat" was printed in 2005, Albany police cars sported a city crest that included the image of a black hand clasping a white hand in cooperation, an appropriation of the classic SNCC symbol. Had Kirk bothered to look at the goals local people defined for their own movement, and not the goals King and SCLC publicized, Browning charged, he would have understood that the Albany Movement succeeded.¹⁷



Figures 7 and 8 The Albany Movement was a mass movement—including a coalition of organizations that attracted individuals from many walks of life—and was active for many years (above). But journalists and a first generation of historians reduced the movement to a dramatic clash of personalities between Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (facing page, Pritchett and King at center). Photographs courtesy of AE Jenkins Photography/Cochran Studio..

The Albany argument owes much to conflicting perspectives and differing understandings of movement periodization and chronology. From the perspective of a King biographer, the Albany Movement existed for a few months before King entered the picture in 1961, and it ended when he left in 1962. In contrast, Stephen G. N. Tuck utilized the community-study approach, took the ideas and goals of local people seriously, and traced the history of the Albany Movement over several decades in his study of black freedom movements in Georgia. The opening pages of Tuck's *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* include a telling 1962 quote from Charles Sherrod: “[O]ur criterion for success is not how many people we register, but how many people we can get to begin initiating decisions solely on the basis of their personal opinion.” “For Sherrod,” Tuck



writes, “civil rights activism was ‘a psychological battle for the minds of the enslaved.’”¹⁸

Almost by definition such a program would require decades to bear fruit. Indeed, Sherrod remained and worked for racial justice in Albany for years after the civil rights movement purportedly ended there. Sherrod directed the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education until 1987 and New Communities, Inc., a cooperative farming project, from 1969 to 1985. He served on the Albany City Commission from 1976 to 1990, where he forced the city to make many of the changes Joan Browning mentioned as signs of progress for which the Albany Movement was directly responsible. Kirk was not the first to step into this minefield; he is hardly alone among King biographers and movement historians in ignoring what happened in Albany after

King retreated. (For instance, in an influential survey of the civil rights literature Charles Eagles touched on the Albany Movement just long enough to refer to it as “one of King’s major setbacks” and “the debacle.”) But as the author of a very perceptive community study of the Little Rock movement, Kirk might have been more attuned to the issues Browning and others have raised.¹⁹

The example of the Albany Movement also illustrates what community studies have done and are doing to shift historians’ understanding of movement chronology and periodization. Today a King-centric book that purported to tell the whole story of the civil rights movement but only spanned the years between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and King’s assassination would be laughed out of the Ivory Tower. (If you don’t believe me, read Charles Payne’s blistering bibliographic essay, “The Social Construction of History”) I hasten to add, however, that, as Steven Lawson pointed out way back in 1986, from the beginning most efforts to topple a Montgomery-to-Memphis chronology have involved a certain amount of setting up and knocking down straw men.²⁰

Community studies have proven beyond all doubt that local civil rights movements drew inspiration, learned tactics from, and in many cases included the same cast of characters of resistance movements from previous eras. They also lasted long past the lifetime of Dr. King. Adam Fairclough argued that activism before the *Brown* decision “constituted more than a prelude to the drama proper; it was the first act of a two-act play.” Tuck does him one better: “[I]f there was a first act of protest before the King years, there was also a third act afterward. . . . The removal of legal segregation raised new questions about the meaning of racial equality at the local level. In many smaller communities, organized challenges to white supremacy occurred only after Lyndon Johnson had signed the [1964] Civil Rights Bill.”²¹

The periodization argument is a good one for civil rights scholars to have, but its value goes far beyond academic debate. If the civil rights movement started not with Rosa Parks’s seemingly impromptu decision to defy Jim Crow segregation on a Montgomery bus or with the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the *Brown* case, if it instead began years earlier in the black church organizing tradition and NAACP activism and continued with the political organizing of radicals and liberals in the New Deal era, gained momentum during World War II, and continued to inspire citizens to change their com-

munities through the 1970s and 1980s and longer, then the civil rights movement wasn’t what the American public thinks it was. It was less incrementalist, more revolutionary than the general public thinks. It was energized not by black preachers but by black Christians. The movement, in fact, involved something more than courageous individuals bearing witness to injustice so that good white Americans could recognize the error of their ways and change. It involved the creation of an alternative culture, a new way of looking at the world, which included economic objectives in addition to the goals of equal citizenship rights and the deracialization of public spaces. If that is what it really involved, then I believe we have to conclude that it was less successful than we like to tell ourselves it was.

If the community studies have shifted historians’ understanding of the nature of the civil rights movement and its chronology, they have also overturned our understanding of its geography. (The concept of a “long civil rights movement” has captured scholars’ attention. It may be possible now to identify a “wide civil rights movement,” too.) I will not go into great detail here, but I do want to acknowledge the watershed importance of Jeanne Theoharis’s and Komozi Woodard’s coedited 2005 volume, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*. The authors of essays in this collection consider historical figures, communities, and issues outside of the “normal” civil rights narrative—Father James Groppi of Milwaukee; the Des Moines, Iowa, Black Panther Party—and familiar figures and organizations—the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the Oakland Black Panther Party—with fresh eyes. Their contributions moved the historiography well past familiar and superficial dichotomies (good early 1960s/bad late 1960s, nonviolent southern movements/violent northern rebellions) and offered original interpretations. Most importantly, they proved that urban and nonsouthern freedom movements developed from similar concerns and similar organizing traditions as their southern counterparts. As Tim Tyson put it, “[T]he civil rights movement’ and ‘the Black Power movement’ emerged from the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom.” I believe this is true, at least generally. But we should be careful not to conflate the northern and southern freedom movements.²²

The post-*Civilities* generation of community studies has added detail and nuance, introduced complicated personalities beyond the movement’s

“heroes,” reframed and reconceptualized the movement, and reshaped academic debates. However, this generation of scholarship has not yet produced a synthesis to replace the grand narrative of the movement—although Raymond Arsenault’s *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* offers clues as to how that synthesis may come about. Arsenault provides something of a travelogue of grass-roots civil rights movements in his wonderful history of the 1961 Freedom Rides and makes great use of the community studies available to him. More than any other civil rights historian before him, Arsenault combines a grand-narrative writing style with attention to local detail that captures the dramatic tensions among local and national movements, leaders, and agents of change. If interpretation of the Albany Movement can be used as a litmus test, Arsenault’s treatment is among the very best histories of the civil rights movement available.²³

Even so, much work remains to be done. Writing in the *Journal of Southern History* in 2000, Charles Eagles argued that taken as a whole, historians of the movement lacked critical perspective and scholarly detachment from the figures and events they chronicled, and questioned whether civil rights historians of an older generation could ever compose objective treatments of the movement. Given their “profound and justifiable moral commitment to the aims of the civil rights movement,” Eagles wrote, scholars of the black freedom struggle had produced no better than asymmetrical treatments of the civil rights era, the time of what he called “the most profound change in southern history.” He charged that historians had uncritically taken the side of movement participants without making significant attempts to understand the movement’s opposition—white segregationists—but he also offered hope. Eagles suggested that a new generation of movement historians would move in to write more nuanced, balanced, and comprehensive chronicles of the revolution as movement participants, the journalists who covered them, and the first generation of fellow-traveling civil rights historians exited the stage. He called for more “imaginative monographic work, new syntheses, and . . . new bold reconceptualizations of the movement’s history.”²⁴

I concur with a large part of Eagles’s critique of civil rights historiography—the part that says civil rights historians must do a better job of placing the movement within the context of biracial southern communities. (This critique has been important for my own work, but not necessarily for the work of others.) I agree, too, that we need to better understand the motivations of white supremacists over a long period of time and am always in favor

of imaginative monographs and new syntheses. But I find it difficult to accept Eagles’s point about generational scholarship and take it to its logical conclusions.

Eagles also criticized scholars who “rely on oral histories but too often accept the voices as telling true stories without verifying the material either with corroborating testimonies from others or with more traditional sources. Just repeating such stories, however compelling they may be, makes for incomplete history.” His point is well-taken. Any historian worth her salt will apply the same rigorous, critical analysis of oral histories that she applies to written sources. But I would also argue that we run a far greater risk of writing incomplete history if we ignore these sources. Oral histories, if rigorously collected and analyzed, offer a rich vein of information and analysis for civil rights historians. Those who are interested not only in collecting oral histories but in reading them critically and comparing them against written sources over a span of time should be familiar with Steve Estes’s essay, “Engendering Movement Memories: Remembering Race and Gender in the Mississippi Movement.” Estes provides a case study for how we can explore the “dialogue between historians and historical actors, between scholarship and activism, between the past and the present[.]”²⁵

The very act of recording oral history has played a significant role, I believe, in historians’ reconceptualization and reperiodization of the civil rights movement. The vast majority of the scholars whose work I mention in this chapter recorded oral histories with movement participants in researching their studies. Of these, the majority undoubtedly used “life history” approaches, in which narrators conceptualized the turning points in their own life stories. Kathryn Nasstrom, for example, based her biography of the white Georgia activist Frances Freeborn Pauley on a series of oral history interviews between the two of them. Nasstrom concluded from this experience, “The storytelling that emerges from oral history practice is a narrative act in which experience is ordered and interpreted, and the life history approach, which aims at a full narration of personal history, leads naturally to a consideration of beginnings and endings. Implicitly, each life story opens onto the question of periodization.” To put it another way, it is possible that historians would have arrived at a new understanding of movement periodization anyway, but the fact is that the accumulation of thousands of these life stories accounts for this particular revolution in civil rights scholarship. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Chafe was among the first civil rights historians to

engage in systematic oral history interviewing; the research behind *Civilities* combined the written record with more than seventy oral histories that he recorded and that he considered “[t]he indispensable core of this book.”²⁶

The beat goes on. Graduate students and assistant professors throughout the land are toiling in the vineyards of community studies even as you read this—I hope that at least one of them is in Albany—and important new works continue to appear at the rate of two or three per year. In 2006 Winston A. Grady-Willis accomplished what I had until then thought was impossible, publishing a community study of Atlanta that made sense of the interplay among the “national” civil rights organizations that were headquartered there, neighborhood campaigns, and actors in the city’s byzantine system of racial politics. He did so within a framework of human-rights challenges to “apartheid,” a concept that will not sit well with everyone but which I (a white who grew up in the Atlanta suburbs) found convincing. Hasan Kwame Jeffries’s 2009 book, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt*, proves beyond all doubt that Stokely Carmichael’s call for “Black Power” was not just sloganeering but was instead firmly rooted in Carmichael’s practical organizing experience on behalf of SNCC in Lowndes County, Alabama. Jeffries introduces the concept of “freedom politics,” an ultra-democratic, transparent form of movement organizing for “freedom rights” that disintegrates the artificial divide between civil rights and Black Power. I look forward to the challenges that the next round of community studies will offer to my own evolving understanding of the movement.²⁷

On the evidence already provided by community studies, scholars now understand the civil rights movement to have been more female, more grass roots, less philosophically nonviolent, and less pulpit-directed than they understood it to be thirty years ago, and where they see successful changes having taken place they are more likely to find decades worth of organizing and struggle behind them. If I can offer a tremendous generalization, scholars now see the civil rights movement preeminently as a movement for self-determination rather than a movement for integration of the races or even for equal civil rights. They see Black Power not in the terms of an earlier generation’s declension model, whereby Black Power rushed in to fill the vacuum that the decline of the civil rights movement created, but as an ideology (amorphous though it may have been) that invigorated local movements long before Stokely Carmichael issued his famous call in 1966. When the next major synthesis of civil rights history is written, its author will have to con-

tend with all of the nuances and details that community studies have added to the history of the movement. She or he will also have to wrestle with these and other examples of the reframing and reconceptualization that the community studies have brought about for this, the most consequential—and endlessly fascinating—social movement in America’s history.

NOTES

1. Randall Kennedy, “Review of *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*,” *The New Republic* (February 16, 1980): 39–40; Neil McMillen, “Review of *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*,” *American Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (April 1982): 565–66.

2. To take just a few recent examples, the focused and solidly researched community studies of Memphis, Tennessee, Durham, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia, recently provided by Laurie B. Green, Christina Greene, and Winston A. Grady-Willis, respectively, have taught us a great deal about the dynamics of the disparate movements that developed in these very different southern cities. Each of these works examined a local movement (or series of movements) through the lenses of gender and class, in addition to race. In their own way, each made an important contribution to the intellectual history of the civil rights movement. Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960–1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). See also J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), a massive and finely detailed examination of movement dynamics in three Alabama communities; and Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), a study of the interplay among a national civil rights advocacy organization, a local movement in Birmingham, and separate economic classes within the city’s black community. This approach has yielded key insights into how social movements developed and operated in other communities. Statewide studies from the likes of Adam Fairclough, John Dittmer, Charles Payne, and Stephen G. N. Tuck have helped civil rights historians develop the deep and nuanced understanding we now have of issues as diverse and as crucial to movement dynamics as the role of violent self-defense, relations between local people and national organizations and “leaders,” and the organiz-

ing networks created by women in every aspect of local civil rights movements. These scholars legitimized the study of "local people," bringing new depth and energy to the literature. Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

3. Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 19-32.

4. David Levering Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Touchstone, 1988); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

5. Fairclough, Tuck, Eskew, Greene, and other authors of community studies have illuminated class divisions within black movements. Emilye Crosby has done much by herself to move our understanding of the movement past the "heroic southern blacks/evil southern whites" dynamic portrayed by Hollywood's version of the civil rights movement, the film "Mississippi Burning." Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). See also Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Plume, 1993); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Man-*

hood, and the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

6. Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Random House, 1985); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

7. J. Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

8. The legal scholar Michael J. Klarman contributed to this debate with his influential article, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," the *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (June 1994): 81-118. For new examinations that tell considerably more complicated stories of how this process developed, see Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*; Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

9. Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

10. Moore's quote appeared in Stan Opatowsky, "Dixie Dynamite: The Inside Story of the White Citizens Councils," an investigative series that ran in the *New York Post*, January 7-20, 1957. See Moyer, 65, 227n1.

11. See Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*; and Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*.

12. Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); and Adam Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). See also Clayborne Carson, "SNCC and the Albany Movement," *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 2 (1984): 15-25. Though none of them consider Albany directly, several of the authors in the collection *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006) tackle the questions of who gets to write movement history and how.

13. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper, 1958).

14. Vincent Harding, "So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Second Coming of America," in *Have We Overcome? Race Relations Since Brown*, ed. Michael V. Namorato (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 51.

15. Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 54. See also Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press,

1965). Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xi.

16. John A. Kirk, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2005), 77–78.

17. Joan C. Browning, "Re: H-South Review: Hustwit on Kirk, Martin Luther King, Jr.," e-mail to the H-South Listserv, March 29, 2006, and "Re: Albany failure," e-mail to the H-South listserv, April 12, 2006. See also Joan C. Browning, "Shiloh Witness," in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 37–83.

18. Sherrod quoted by Tuck, 3.

19. For Sherrod's biography see <http://www.reportingcivilrights.org/authors/bio.jsp?authorId=147>; Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," the *Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 4 (November 2000): 842; John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940–1970* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

20. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 413–41. Steven F. Lawson, "Response to Clayborne Carson," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, 33.

21. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, xii; Tuck, 2.

22. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," the *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; and, for a dissenting view, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265–88. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); see especially Theoharis and Woodard's introductory essay. Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3.

23. Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

24. Eagles, "Toward New Histories," 815–6, 844.

25. *Ibid.*, 836. Steve Estes, "Engendering Movement Memories: Remembering Race and Gender in the Mississippi Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 290–312.

26. Kathryn Nasstrom, "Beginnings and Endings: Life Stories and the Periodization of the Civil Rights Movement," the *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 700–11. See also William H. Chafe, "The Gods Bring Threads to Webs Begun," the *Journal of American History* 86, no. 4 (March 2000): 1531–51. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 421.

27. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid*; Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). See also Jeffries, "Organizing for More Than the Vote: The Political Radicalization of Local People in Lowndes County, Alabama, 1965–1966," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, 140–63, and Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).